Student Engagement: a catalyst for transformative change

Student Engagement: a catalyst for transformative change
Conference Proceedings 2013

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Preface

We are very pleased to publish, the papers from the Conference, 'Student Engagement: a catalyst for transformative change, held at the Jordanstown Campus of the University of Ulster, 24 January 2013.

The editorial group would like to thank the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP) and Professor Denise McAlister for financial support, enabling publication and editing work to be carried out.

We hope that you will find much to interest you in these papers and that they will prove helpful to you in your work with students.

Roisín Curran, Vicky Davies, Sarah Floyd, Amanda Platt,

Joint Editors (University of Ulster)

Student Engagement: a catalyst for transformative change
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Foreword

I am very pleased to present a selection of edited papers from the Conference, 'Student Engagement: a catalyst for transformative change', held at the Jordanstown Campus of the University of Ulster, 24 January 2013. The objectives of the conference were to:

- Foster a culture that places students at the 'heart of the system';
- Develop an understanding of what we mean by student engagement;
- Initiate dialogue between students and staff to enhance the student experience;
- Consult on an evolving Ulster model of partnership between students and staff which promotes a collaborative approach to the design of the learning experience;
- Share best practices in student engagement for learning policies and governance in higher education.

Sub-themes for the conference included the following:

- Student-staff partnerships;
- Research-informed teaching;
- Students as researchers;
- Students as peer mentors;
- Creative approaches to assessment and feedback;
- Student transition.

The timing of this conference, in the consultation year of development of the new Ulster Learning & Teaching Strategy, provided a valuable opportunity for the sharing of current thinking on processes and practices in learning and teaching in higher education and in particular to consult on an emerging theme of 'students as partners'. In addition, a notable feature of this conference was that the keynotes and many of the parallel sessions were co-presented by staff and students. This collaborative approach proved extremely useful in stimulating a more inclusive debate on what student engagement means at Ulster and provided an impetus to move forward with the 'students as partners' agenda.

The feedback received during the conference from staff and students was carefully considered and has contributed to the formulation of the new Learning and Teaching Strategy (2013/14 – 2017/18), in particular Strategic Aim 2.

> *To provide transformative, high quality, learning experiences through the promotion of meaningful staff student partnerships that engender a shared responsibility.*

The contributions collected together for this publication reflect the broad range of themes addressed in the conference and offer insights into current issues and practice in learning and teaching.

I am particularly grateful to our keynote speakers who brought their specialist knowledge to our conference, adding considerably to the interest of our discussions, and in particular to

Professor Stuart Brand, Birmingham City University, who has agreed to our publication of his contribution.

In addition, I would also like to thank all the other conference speakers who submitted their papers for publication, enabling us to put together an interesting and varied representation of the conference as a whole.

I hope that you will enjoy reading the papers and will find much to stimulate thought and reflection as well as new approaches, processes and practices in our joint pursuit to foster partnerships which act as a catalyst for a transformative higher education experience.

Roisín Curran
Chair, Conference Organising Committee and Student Engagement Strategic Work Stream

Developing the Learning Community through Students as Partners

Stuart Brand, Director of Learning Experience, Birmingham City University

In 2008, through internal student surveys and the more formal route of the National Student Survey it became clear to the University that students did not feel part of an academic community when they studied at Birmingham City University. This was perceived as a weakness for our institution as groups of relatively isolated courses were unable to support a wider university student experience.

As a large metropolitan university of 23,000 students spread across eight campuses there appeared to be little aspiration for student engagement within a university-wide community. Student life would typically involve students driving in, attending a lecture and then returning to their extra-curricular lives off campus. Very few students became engaged with any other form of university activity and this was a concern for some of us at the University who wanted to see students benefitting from a whole university experience which led to them developing the skills and experiences that wider engagement might offer.

The University sought to address this failing through an initiative led by the University's Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) and Birmingham City Students' Union:

> *"securing a greater level of engagement of students in all aspects of their learning experience, ranging from course design through participation in and subsequent evaluation of delivery. Our aim is that the university will seek to generate a Learning Community in which students and staff jointly contribute to the pursuit of learning. An effective and vibrant community of students and staff will be the cornerstone of our activities."*
>
> Professor Stuart Brand Director, CELT

The initial plan involved the development of student engagement activities at the University through a new and strong partnership with Birmingham City Students' Union. As Chapman *et al* (2013) point out the partnership was pragmatically and symbolically important as it offered new opportunities to reach students while demonstrating to all stakeholders a commitment to new ways of working through new partnerships.

The primary output of this relationship with the Students' Union was the creation of the Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme. This initiative encouraged students to be paid to work alongside staff on projects intended to enhance the learning experience of students and often, the working lives of staff. The SAP scheme has operated for five years and supports around fifty projects each year. The projects have the potential to reinvigorate curriculum and improve students' learning experiences. The success of the SAP scheme, which received the Times Higher Education award for Outstanding Support for Students in 2010, has had a major impact upon the University's approach to engaging with students, enabling other initiatives to be developed. The University now also offers a student academic mentoring programme and a collaborative projects scheme characterised by a multidisciplinary cross-faculty focus. Perhaps most significant though, is the fact that the institution has now become aware of the value and ability of its own students and it now

offers over 1000 employment opportunities for students in all aspects of the University's operation through a new student jobs on campus programme.

There is a developing theoretical and policy led debate now arising across the HE sector at the core of which is the discussion about whether students are consumers or partners in their learning. Gibbs (2012) states that "students do not consume knowledge but construct it in a personal way in the context of learning environments that include teaching: they are co-producers and collaborators". By working with students as partners we believe we make them more effective and motivated learners.

However, we also recognise that some of our colleagues view student engagement from a more mechanistic perspective and focus upon reasons that are not about just benefitting students. As Gibbs (2012) states "improving students' effectiveness as learners has more impact on performance and learning gains than does improving teaching or improving curricula". Some colleagues may see engagement as a mechanism to improve their own course standings through improved student retention and success rather than any particular belief in student engagement.

The real test for our work at BCU is that of scalability of engagement activities so that it becomes applicable to the majority of students at the University, not just a minority. As Rachel Wenstone, Vice President (HE) at the NUS states in the introduction to the NUS report (2012):

> *"We have spent enough time condemning consumerism in education, and now we need to articulate the alternative. Student engagement is a great concept but it needs to be deployed to radical ends. Students as partners is not just a nice to have, I believe it has the potential to help bring about social and educational transformation".*

Student engagement at BCU forms part of a wider University initiative to create a greater sense of learning community at the University in which staff and students consider it the norm, not the exception, that they are engaged in academic conversations about the nature of their courses. These conversations can be transformative as the relationship of student to staff changes and the 'them and us' separation is nullified.

> *"Working with my student partner has been a real treat for me. She has shared a wealth of knowledge and insight of the student experience and together, through this project, we have been able to add to that experience through the extension of provision for learning outside of the School's degree programme provision. Throughout this opportunity I have enjoyed working alongside a student as a colleague and I am proud to have been associated with the SAP Scheme as it provides such a valuable opportunity for our students to develop their skill sets"*
>
> Staff quote

> *"I've not felt that we've been the students and they've been the staff, we haven't been told what to do, it has been refreshing and nice to have this equal standing. I think it has worked well so far because we have a good mix of approaches, how we work and we have learnt off each other... you feel like you are learning and growing*

rather than just being told which is nice...we just feel like a team, there is no hierarchy or anything so it's great."

Student quote

For the past five years Birmingham City University and Birmingham City Students' Union have been working together to embed student engagement within the student learning experience. This has been recognised by the partners receiving the first NUS and Higher Education Academy Institutional partnership award in 2013. Whilst such awards are very nice and reassuring that we are moving in the right direction, the most telling statistic is that over the past four years of the National Students Survey 2008-2012 the score for the additional question, I feel part of an academic community in my college or university, has risen from a 65% satisfaction rate to a 76% score. There is still some way to go, but we believe we are moving in the right direction. The main challenge as we go forward is to broaden and deepen impact through further initiatives aimed at the whole student population.

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Stuart Brand leads the University Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and drives a University wide focus on student academic engagement. He has also led a strategic three year initiative for the Redesign of Learning Experience (RoLEx) across the institution. He focusses on improving the student learning experience through more effective partnership with Birmingham City Students' Union. This partnership, recognised with a Times Higher Education Award in 2010, led to development of the Student Academic Partners scheme through which students are employed to work in partnership with staff on enhancement projects. Previously, he led the University's Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) – the Centre for Stakeholder Learning Partnerships. The CETL focussed initially on work with National Health Service employers and latterly on student engagement.

Supporting Environmental Science, Geography and Marine Science undergraduates through the use of Senior Student Tutor workshops: an evaluation of their impacts.

Martin Eaton, Mary Mallaghan and Keira Quinn, University of Ulster

Abstract

Undergraduate intake into the School of Environmental Sciences, Ulster comprises students studying honours degree programmes in environmental sciences, geography and marine science, and students following a two-year non-honours Associate Bachelors degree (ABD) in environmental studies. Induction includes first year students interacting with studies advisers and senior student tutors (SSTs) in small group activities. The main aim of the SST workshops is to help level four students prepare for their end-of-semester modular written examinations. This article outlines the scheme and shows how peer-mentors facilitate the readying of first year students for what is a challenging task. Using an empirical survey we evaluate their effectiveness in bridging the experiential learning gap between themselves and those under their tutelage. It is argued that faculty suffering from student progression problems traceable to weaknesses in examination performance could benefit from adopting this locally, controlled, low cost, small scale peer-mentoring model.

Introduction

Student-mentoring partnerships have a long history and were embedded in the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programme at the University of Manchester, which was based upon a Supplemental Instruction (SI) model pioneered by the University of Missouri-Kansas City in the early-1970s (Hurley *et al.*, 2006). As an externally franchised scheme PASS/SI recruits pairs of non-subject specialist students to act as peer leaders. Volunteers organise seminars and facilitate student-centred/group learning in an informal environment across a spectrum of courses. The scheme is centrally organised, focused upon failing modules, utilises a reflective feedback trail from leaders to teaching staff and allows for regular meetings between PASS mentors to share their experiences. Studies have shown these programmes to be effective in improving students' learning skills and academic performances (Loviscek and Cloutier, 1997; McGuire, 2006). In a similar vein, peer-assisted learning (PAL) has been adopted internationally by disciplines including chemistry, economics, education and mathematics (Condell and Yogarajah, 2010). A growing body of research supports these types of student-to-student intervention (Capstick and Fleming, 2002; Ashwin, 2003, Ning and Downing, 2010) or what Boud, *et al.*, (2001, p.4) calls the process of "students learning from and with each other". However, analyses of "the effects of PAL in the context of the higher educational system of the UK and Ireland (remain) relatively sparse" (Parkinson, 2009, p.381). This article is, therefore, intended to make a tentative contribution to fledgling empirical research that is predicated upon students' evaluations of PAL (Glynn *et al*., 2006).

The senior student tutor (SST) project in the School of Environmental Sciences, Ulster was established in 2004. Implemented at the local scale it follows a path based upon constructivist learning theory (Karagiorgi, *et al.*, 2005). Focusing on high risk assessment procedures (three-hour long written examinations), we utilise SSTs to organise revision workshops. They share their experiences and shape the learning environment by helping first year students to construct their knowledge and understanding of revision strategies and

exam preparations (Longfellow *et al*., 2008). The SSTs foster interaction between different cohorts, cultivate an inclusive collegial spirit and utilise semi-formal partnerships to improve the educational experiences and academic performances for themselves and their tutees (Stout and McDaniel, 2006).

In light of these aspirations, this article begins with an explanation of what senior student tutoring entails before outlining the methodological issues fuelling a recent appraisal of the scheme. Based upon a flexible design strategy this action research project elicited empirical material addressing the impacts of the SST project from the viewpoints of the student protagonists and the tutoring practitioners. Enquiry was undertaken in 2010-11 and centred upon three research questions.

(1) How could we improve first year student written examination performance?
(2) How could we develop student partnerships within the School?
(3) What impacts did the SST scheme have on these processes?

Senior student tutors

First year students are enrolled in a range of environmental science, geography and marine science honours degree programmes, as well as a two-year, non-honours Associate Bachelors degree (ABD) in environmental studies. They study a common curriculum with six modules containing four written examinations taken from earth, physical and social science-based subjects, together with a skills toolbox covering geographical information systems and statistical analysis. Transition to tertiary level education is supported by induction activities involving an initial week long activity period that includes a residential field trip. This transforms into a teaching staff led weekly tutorial system and a longitudinal focus upon the acquisition of study skills. Generic to all programmes, these include graduate level essay writing, referencing technique, personal development planning, careers preparation and oral presentation.

As part of this annual induction the School employs several final year and/or postgraduate students to take part in peer tutoring activities. SSTs are recruited after an application process requiring submission of curriculum vitae (CV) and covering letter outlining suitability for the post. They will have demonstrated good academic performance, are anticipating or have gained good degree classifications, and have a sound knowledge and understanding of their subject programmes and taught modules. Each has at least five semesters of experience of the practice associated with the School's teaching and learning strategy. In comparison to PASS/SI/PAL schemes elsewhere (where leaders are often unpaid volunteers) our SSTs receive a small remuneration and undertake a training programme arranged in association with Ulster's staff development unit. Sessions are focussed upon how to tutor small groups of between 10 and 15 students in preparation for conducting a series of three, 50 minute-long workshops that take place in the final three weeks of the teaching semester. With no fixed agenda, workshops can include formative activities such as revision techniques, planning for examinations, reading around topics, evaluation of marking criteria, locating and reviewing past papers, writing of exercise examination essays, construction of plans, and/or discussion of outline answers.

Workshops provide a smaller-scale and shorter but more time-intensive variation on the PASS/SI/PAL schemes. In contrast, our SST's are subject-specialists who can discuss programme, module and examination material, share their received learning strategies and

help develop generic study skills. They are not expected to instruct or provide 'answers' but can offer hints and guidelines. SSTs are encouraged to use their own experiential learning and reflection to lead the first year students to construct their understanding of what is required in the end-of-semester examinations. Attendance for first year students is widely publicised, motivational messages are issued and sessions are timetabled into the curriculum. Content is organised by the SST's, although support materials, advice and thrice semester, once a week, training/briefing, critical reflection/debriefing periods are undertaken in collaboration with the member of teaching staff organising the scheme.

Methodological Issues

Enquiry was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the scheme in bridging the experiential learning gap between senior student tutors and first year students. The project was based upon a flexible research design strategy whereby qualitatively structured inquiry helped to demonstrate the opinions of the two sets of key players (Robson, 2011). Detailed empirical feedback was received from first year students engaging in the SST scheme via a structured questionnaire, which was specifically designed to elicit critical evaluations of the workshops. Open-ended questions focussed upon recollections of attendance, explanations for absence, motivational factors for attendance, perceptions of satisfactory and unsatisfactory aspects of the scheme, suggestions for improvements and a comment on the performance of SSTs. Anonymity for the respondent was assured. An independent response was encouraged and no prompts or suggestions for answers were offered. Enquiries were administered amongst the class of 2010/11 after three scheduled workshops and before their examinations had taken place. A total of 70 questionnaires were completed representing a response rate amongst workshop attendees of 80 per cent. Temporal and logistical constraints meant we were unable to ascertain the views of absentee students. Comments emerging from a thematic word analysis of the responses were then extracted to inform our discussion (Norton, 2009).

In the second part of our methodology we examined the impacts of the scheme from the SSTs' perspectives. Four senior student tutors were recruited (three final year undergraduate students drawn from the geography and environmental science programmes, and one PhD student who had previously studied ES). Individual, in-depth, structured interviews were undertaken aimed at establishing their reasons for applying, views on training, workshop activities undertaken, perceived aspects that they enjoyed or disliked and suggestions for improvement. Again, respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Discussions were held after the completion of their third workshops and a period of reflection, leading to fine-grained qualitative interpretations with high levels of individual integrity and insight.

This methodology has its strengths and limitations (Capstick, 2004), and any attempt to establish a concrete relationship between student-to-student intervention and positive outcome has to be treated with caution (Smith and Norton, 2007). For example, the element of self-selection into the scheme by more able students and tutors is problematic and needs to be acknowledged. Equally, the snap shot nature of the survey meant that, in the case of the SSTs, only a limited number of views frozen to one point in time could be collated. Nevertheless, our four stage action research methodology was based upon defining the inquiry, describing the situation, collecting and analysing relevant qualitative data, before critically reflecting with a view to introducing change (author's adaptation from Bassey, 1998). This allowed for a pragmatic and interlinked exploration of the impacts of the SST

workshops on the interested parties through the implementation of a robust, two-pronged empirical survey (Creswell, 2003).

Evaluation - first year student views

Analysis of our survey results showed that a minority of respondents (13 per cent) had attended all three SST workshops; the average number of attendances was 1.7, with a modal attendance at one workshop. Indeed, 46 per cent of first year students only went to a single session (usually the first). Reasons for subsequent absence were related to having "to complete other assessed coursework" (accounting for 56 per cent of explanations) and to a lesser extent "sickness" (16 per cent). In addition to this prioritisation of activities, individual commitments including child care, paid employment, personal appointments, sporting activities and transport logistics were highlighted, alongside forgetfulness and inclement weather. Comment from the SSTs suggested the lapses were due to a lack of any marked assessment associated with the workshops and, conversely, with being given homework (for example, the writing of exercise essays in between workshops – see Table 5).

Our evaluation form contained open questions beginning with a request to explain their reasons for attending the workshops.

Table 1. Reasons for attendance.

Why did you go?	(n=89) % of responses
To prepare for and learn about the examinations (get tips)	37
To learn better revision techniques/gain advice on relevant study skills	22
To gain from the experience of the SST in having done exams previously	18
Other reasons	23

Source: Author's survey (2010-11)

Results from Table 1 showed that first year students understood what the scheme was about and, more importantly, what it was designed to achieve. Opportunities to learn about the exams, study new revision techniques and working out what to expect (when based upon their SSTs' acumen) were features in almost three-quarters of respondents' reasons for attending workshops. This was testament to the SSTs powers of explanation and the alacrity with which most of them conducted their sessions.

Table 2. Strengths of the scheme.

What did you like most?	(n = 131) % of responses
Given the chance to review past papers and practise exam questions	27
Everyone joining in/discussing/sharing revision tips and methods	19
Informal, personable, friendly, relaxed approach of tutor	18
Able to learn from knowledge and experience of tutor	18
Other opinions	18

Source: Author's survey (2010-11)

We asked first year students to outline those elements that they found satisfactory. Table 2 demonstrated that whilst they were expected to give two responses, some first year students contributed several explanations, reflecting their enthusiasm for the process. Analysis showed that as part of an experiential learning process many students enjoyed what was done in the workshops and how it was delivered by their SSTs. Almost 40 per cent of responses stated that when congregated in a discursive, group sharing environment, our first year students felt comfortable gleaning insight and taking advice from an experienced individual. Around one in five responses showed that the less formal atmosphere generated by their SSTs led to a safe working environment, which gave first year students freedom to discuss examination issues. Over one quarter of responses said being given the chance "to practise" their answering technique before the real examination took place was a key factor.

Table 3. Weaknesses of the scheme.

What did you like least?	(n =104) % of responses
Day and time allocated, length of session, venue	38
Exercises considered repetitive and/or irrelevant	14
Formality, hard to relax, difficult to speak out in front of rest of class	13
Nothing	11
Groups were either too big or too small	10
Other opinions	14

Source: Author's survey (2010-11)

Table 3 revealed the unsatisfactory features of the scheme. Criticisms related to temporal and spatial constraints; problems with what was done and how it was carried out by one of the SSTs, the relevance of activities, together with a lack of agreement on what constituted an optimal size for the classes. Variability in terms of the confidence, commitment, knowledge and inter-personal skills of individual SSTs was to be expected (and a problem experienced by others; e.g. Smith and Norton, 2007). Almost 40 per cent of responses disliked the timing of the workshops (12.15pm on a Wednesday), claiming to have other personal/sporting commitments. Remedial measures involved more first year tutorial slots being timetabled to increase flexibility in the system and avoid clashes (remembering, of course, that our SSTs had study commitments to deal with). Fourteen per cent of responses indicated that the workshop exercises were repetitive and/or irrelevant in the sense that they were "focussing too much on simple study and revision skills" that had been previously embedded.

Table 4. Suggested changes.

What improvements could be made?	(n = 80) % of responses
Change timing of workshop sessions to suit first year students	21
No changes required	19
Have smaller groups with more tutors available	19
Have fewer classes and make sessions shorter	10
Other improvements	31

Source: Author's survey (2010-11)

First year students were given the opportunity to state how they would change the SST system and their ideas are shown in Table 4. Numbers of responses declined suggesting that this question was difficult to answer. Nevertheless, almost one in five thought that no changes were required, reiterating the general satisfaction attainable from attending the

workshops. Similar proportions of first year students proposed a change to the timetabling of the sessions and supported moves towards smaller groups of less than five persons and even customised “one-to-one” first year: tutoring ratios.

The final question established first year students’ opinions of their senior student tutors. On a four-point rating scale, results showed that our SSTs were appreciated for their efforts in leading the workshops and facilitating activities. More than nine out of ten scored their tutor as being excellent or very helpful. Moreover, they were valued for their “advice”, “approachability”, “forthrightness”, “honesty”, “humour” and “politeness” along with their abilities to “communicate” and “inform”. First year students recognised the altruism demonstrated by their SSTs and were happy to praise them.

Evaluation - senior student tutor views

From the other side of the coin, we found that motivations to apply for the SST position were based in three out of four cases on self-developmental desires to gain experience as a learning facilitator with a view to future career progression. Tutor C, for example, “felt it would help develop me as a person towards my goal of being a teacher” and Tutor A expressed a “wish to pursue a career in environmental education”. Two of the SSTs (B and C) demonstrated selfless motives aimed at “sharing techniques”, “creating a sense of pride within students” and fulfilment of a wish to “pass on my advice and experience”. More personal reasons related to “financial reward”, “look(ing) well on my (teacher-training) application” and (in line with Ogden *et al*., 2003) improvement of their own study strategies through “the ability to re-examine (my) revision technique … (to) assist my own personal study in the future”.

All four found the training sessions useful. Prior to becoming involved with the scheme, each SST had limited knowledge and understanding of how to tutor; ranging from knowing “a lot about learning styles” to being “pretty much clueless”. Training helped to crystallise thought processes by providing “a base and knowledge to work from” (Tutor C) and giving opportunity to “pool together and pick up ideas for the workshops” (Tutor D). This satisfaction extended to the SSTs offering few suggestions for improvement other than Tutor A requesting “a (pre-training) brief … outline of what we will discuss” and Tutor D broaching the “possibility of offering senior student tutors the opportunity to pursue a more extended training programme … similar to what new teaching staff are offered”. Financial and temporal restraints have restricted such in-house expansion. Nevertheless, Ulster now offers a 10 credits Peer Assisted Study Skills module as part of its continuing personal and professional development strategy, in which our SSTs can look to participate.

Senior student tutors outlined details of their workshop activities. Responses were remarkable for their heterogeneity and self-initiative as each tutor took the training frameworks and embellished them with their own experientially-informed ideas. Table 5 showed techniques ranging from visualising positive outcomes to discussing revision methods and identifying command words. The influences of alcohol and psychological stresses upon the revision process were also examined. Emphasis lay on developing first year students’ deep-thinking skills through construction of what Tutor D called “a ‘model’ that describe(d) types of information and advancing stages of learning”. This involved “factual information – recall and description, moving up through synthesising ... information, categorising into topics, understanding issues, identifying interrelationships, towards gaining

original insights (to the examination questions)". Equally, SSTs focussed upon practicalities such as identifying additional resources, reading around topics, compiling revision and examination timetables, as well as reviewing marking criteria and locating previous examination papers.

Table 5. Senior student tutoring activities.

	Workshop 1	2	3
Tutor A	• Revision overview • Learning styles	• Exams overview • Revision approaches to each exam	• Review past exam papers • Revision 24 hours prior to exam
B	• Discuss influences of alcohol and stress • Visualisation techniques • Identify strengths and weaknesses	• Use of e-journals • Revision sources • Importance of reading material • Emphasise study routines • Importance of helping each other	• Exam timetable • Formulate checklists for exams • Review past exam papers • Focus on key words
C	• Discuss revision techniques • Revision 24 hours prior to exam • Collect past exam papers (homework)	• Understand command words • Simplify questions • Create brief answer plans • Extend plan into essay answer (homework)	• Review past exam papers
D	• Discuss revision frame of mind • Organise revision time • Discuss exam requirements/time table	• Exam timetable • Understand command words • Essay answer plans • Extend plan into essay answer (homework)	• Marking criterion • Importance of reading material • Walk through exam situation • Revision 24 hours prior to exam

Source: Author's survey (2010-11)

Food for Thought

The formative consequences of attending three workshops were a common thread; facilitated by interaction, small-group discourse and habitual reporting of findings. As Tutor C confirmed "the idea of reporting back to the class was so they could all feed off each other and learn from their peers". Transmission of messages was not a two way flow from tutor to

tutee but emanated from tutee towards fellow tutees and then back to the tutor. The circulatory nature of this practice helped to create a supportive teaching and learning environment and contributed to an enhanced sense of co-operation and collegial spirit amongst those prepared to participate. Our stakeholders were empowered to embrace their self-learning process and helped create a student centred community that was characterised by a sense of partnership and mutual achievement. Tutor B, for instance, noted that he "enjoyed … observing the improvement in exam preparation, especially by those who consistently attended the group, as well as sharing knowledge and ideas in a positive environment". Tutor C expressed similar sentiments by declaring "I really enjoyed the preparation for each class and feeling as if I was doing something to benefit the students and prepare them for their exams".

On the downside, flaws in the system were exposed, including the problem of finding suitable workshop time slots, avoiding conflicts with other academic (i.e. coursework) commitments, and ensuring SST sessions had currency and relevance (to encourage additional attendance). The question of whether groups were too big or too small was also raised echoing the concerns of first year students shown in Table 2. This issue required careful handling because both situations impacted upon a small number of students' confidence levels in different ways. On one hand, if a group was considered too big then some individuals were afraid to speak out. Intimidation could be felt equally if the group was thought too small since the focus of attention was magnified still further. These concerns also explained some of the 'tail-off' in attendances as students took the opportunity of absenting themselves. From the SSTs' perspectives, this decline prompted criticism and self-doubt. As Tutor B observed, "although the importance of class was emphasised to students many failed to see 'how' important it was to attend. Numbers decreased dramatically in each class, which I hope does not reflect the standard of (tutoring)". Tutor D reflected on "not being able to encourage and deliver as much interaction as both students and (I) would have liked. In that respect, I feel I lack the necessary skills to enthuse and motivate". Tutor C was more philosophical declaring "the only improvements I feel that could be made would be for more of the students to attend but I guess they can't be forced to attend and the people who want to better themselves will attend".
This notion that the senior student tutors were preaching to the more able students has to be taken into account. Nevertheless, we would argue that value added benefits have accrued. Our SSTs, for example, have helped to bridge the experiential learning gap and made connections that would not have been possible in a more formal, teaching staff-led scenario. Tutor A, for instance, noted that "I feel respected by the first year students who genuinely seem to value my ideas as they knew I was coming from a student's point of view, not a lecturer's". Likewise, Tutor C stated that "I enjoyed the interaction with the students; they gave me different insights into how they revise and how they would prepare. I liked the way the students were prepared to listen and take on board my advice".

The feelings of trust were reciprocated as the study showed that first year students valued the advice proffered and the "real life" acumen of their older, wiser and more experienced peers (see Table 2). This fits with models identified by previous researchers (e.g. Wallace, 2003; Capstick, 2004). We would argue, therefore, that more independent first year student learners have emerged; ones who are able to study and revise effectively for examinations, have better understanding of modular contents and improved learning, reasoning, problem-solving and communication skills. It can also be inferred that first year students and senior

student tutors have improved their personal development attributes on the back of these heightened levels of interaction, communication and co-operation. In the future, this vertical integration framework or "expert scaffolding" (Falchikov, 2001, p.89) will be extended from its present bookended (level four: levels six and seven) structure. We have taken on board Tutor C's suggestion of bringing in "a (level five) second year … to give the first years an insight as to how second year developed from last year's sessions … for anybody interested this could show a development path from being tutored to assisting the tutor to being a tutor yourself".

First year students have benefited financially by reducing their supplementary examinations fees and the SSTs have benefited from remuneration that reflected their efforts. As Tutor D confirmed "financial reward, however modest it might appear, was definitely one of the considerations. Equally important was the opportunity to gain tutoring experience in preparation for career progression after studies". This was a triple-win situation since the SSTs were able to gain valuable insights, tutoring proficiency and an evidence base useful to their CVs. Three quarters of SSTs reported that the scheme had clarified their career ambitions (towards teaching), provided them with appropriate training, and self-recognition that the experience was integral to managing their vocational pathways.

Conclusions

This type of SST scheme operating as part of a comprehensive studies advice tutorial system has been relatively successful. Positive student partnerships have developed as a result of engagement with the peer tutoring scheme. Key drivers included careful recruitment and training of SSTs, the fostering of their organisational and self-initiative study-skills, as well as a willingness amongst first year students to actively participate. This standardisation/free-rein nexus meant that teaching and learning responsibilities could be shared and peer learning communities were developed. Novice "students (have been) inducted into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education" (Boud and Associates, 2010, p.2). The notion of exams as a powerful driver of student behaviour has also been embedded (University of Technology Sydney, 2010). Utilising the experiential maturity associated with final year and postgraduate students, our SSTs have contributed positively to first year students making their transitions between secondary and tertiary (UK) education systems. Moreover, we have helped to develop more independent learners capable of achieving examination success and thereby facilitated their progression to the next level.

Nevertheless, it is clear that we face challenges. First, the scheme has to explore ways of embracing the weaker non-attendees who were drawn mainly from the Marine Science programme. Traditionally, we have struggled to recruit SSTs from this subject area and this lack of a programme specific affinity may explain the anomalous findings associated with this group of students. Second, we need to commission specific enquiry aimed at non-attendees to improve our understanding of their situations. Third, a longitudinal survey dimension needs to be built into the research. Fourth, we have to facilitate the next generations' demands and make workshops more attractive through use of social media, text-messaging, etc. Finally, a means of improving the rates of extended engagement with three scheduled workshops has to be found, since it is important to reward the diligence shown by SSTs in preparing activities. To this end, we have introduced (in the final workshop) an assessed piece of coursework based upon a mock examination question exercise.

In terms of our research questions, it is fair to say that the senior student tutoring scheme offers the potential to be transferred to other schools and faculties in Ulster or beyond. In particular, those in the HE environment suffering from progression problems traceable to weaknesses in written examination performance could benefit. Equally, those seeking to improve student partnerships, within and between different programme- and year-cohorts could take advantage by adopting this locally controlled, low-cost, small-scale peer-tutoring model. Attention, however, must be given to encouraging attendance and publicising the inclusive and formative nature of attending all scheduled workshops.

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Students as Peer Mentors: The Value of Mentors and Mentees in Art and Design

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the use of a peer mentor program for all students within art and design, with specific reference to two courses at Belfast School of Art. The definitions of mentoring within the student context are discussed and defined with the help of students, students as partners to other students. There is an explanation and rationale of the recruitment and training process involved, feedback from mentors and mentees, changes made and the benefits to retention, the student experience, building confidence and aiding transition.

"Social Integration and Social Support are closely linked and are vital to the University experience. Successful integration in both social and academic areas reduces the likelihood of student withdrawal"(Tinto, 1994, p18).

Therefore, a formalised approach to social interaction could be seen to be required at course level. Peer support groups, mentors, icebreakers and staff guidance are all essential approaches. The institution must also recognise its responsibility to provide additional and specialised support to students, and this can be enhanced with the involvement of students as peer mentors.

For the purposes of this case study, the mentor and mentee roles, are both taken on by students at Belfast School of Art. It may be worth noting the role of mentoring of year one and year zero students within the art and design context, where learning and teaching can differ from that of the traditional lecture/ seminar structure. Art and design courses are historically delivered within studios and workshops, alongside lectures and seminars. Students may work in the same spaces as other year groups and spend much of their time within the studio environment. This study will discuss the definitions of peer mentor in the context of student to student, with particular emphasis on the peer mentor program which ran in 2009, 2011 and for the year 2013/14.

The project was initiated in response to attendance at the International Conference on the First Year Experience, organised by the University of South Carolina, and held at University College Dublin, through the award of a STAR bursary. The following year, mentors were recruited from BDes Art & Design (Foundation Year for Specialist Degrees), for the introduction of a peer mentor program in the following academic year of the course. The project was piloted with the aim of providing non-academic support to all students in the Year Zero cohort. This was in contrast to other mentor programs which target struggling or 'at risk' students. It was through other examples of similar programs discussed at the conference that the value of all students becoming mentees became evident. No student can be seen as being 'singled-out', and all students on the course were assigned a mentor.

The Industrial Society (1995,p4) defines mentoring as:

"A confidential, one-to-one relationship in which an individual uses a more experienced, usually more senior person as a sounding board and for guidance. It is a protected, non-judgemental relationship…"

The above quote provides an important clue as to what mentoring can be. The issue of confidentiality is key. There must be trust between mentor and mentee, in order for the

mentee to share fears and experiences. ‘More experienced, usually more senior’, is not necessarily relevant in this case study. The mentor is a first or second year student to a mentee, who may be a year zero or year one student (depending on the course). They are not considered senior, but rather have more experience of the course, having gone through the program the year before. This prior knowledge is intended as key in showing empathy and understanding of the particular course specific issues that the mentee may be experiencing. Evidence of experience has proven more beneficial than seniority.
Mentors must also act as a sounding board, being able to listen in a non-judgemental way. During a task in the mentor training sessions, some students were unsure as to the definition of sounding board, but through discussion, it became clear that mentees should feel confident and comfortable in having opinions about the course without feeling judged. This leads on to feelings of protection. Time to communicate must be protected and regular. This builds up a relationship, trust and is beneficial to both mentor and mentee. Mentors were asked to commit one hour per week to making contact with mentors, usually via email, with face to face meetings arranged at least twice in the semester.
Another definition of mentoring can be seen as:
“Mentoring involves primarily listening with empathy, sharing experiences and learning (usually mutually), professional friendship, developing insight through reflection, being a sounding board, encouraging” (Gardiner, 1998, p.80)
This appears similar to the first quote, but with the addition and focus on mutuality and professional friendship. This leans more heavily to the issues concerned with peer mentoring among students in art and design. Mutuality is the idea that both mentor and mentee will gain from the experience. Hay (1999, p.56) argues that mentoring can be described as a developmental alliance, where: “a relationship between equals in which one or more of those involved is enabled to increase awareness…and initiate action to develop themselves.” It is consistently found that the mentors involved in the program, who must volunteer for the role, do so in order to benefit themselves as well as through altruistic motives to help another student. Benefits to mentors are seen as ‘it will add another line to my cv’, ‘I learned a lot more about what the University is about’, and ‘Met new people, made new friends’.

Aims of the program:

In this particular mentor program, it was specified that the support provided by the mentor is social rather than academic.

- Focus on the social not academic mentoring
- Positive social interaction
- Orientate new students
- Encourage mentors in their own development
- Impact positively on retention rates
- Aid transition into university
- Aid students, both mentors and mentees, gain confidence
- Aid students’ engagement with the university

This is in contrast to other mentor programs, which target ‘at risk’ or struggling students, therefore no student can be seen as being ‘singled-out’. A decision was made that all students where assigned a mentor. This approach is taken at The University of South Australia’s ‘You’re not on your own’, large scale, multi-campus, first-year, peer mentoring programme. All first year students are automatically assigned a mentor who is responsible for ten to fifteen mentees.

Process

Potential mentors are recruited from the previous year's cohort. Students were required to apply for the role through a written statement outlining their suitability for the role. In the initial pilot project ten mentors were selected for one hundred and thirty six mentees (2009/10), with each mentor having responsibility for thirteen or fourteen mentees. In the second cycle, twelve mentors selected for one hundred and thirty eight mentees (2011/12). In the most recent program, the number of mentors/ mentees has dropped significantly as it is running within a different course. This must be highlighted as possible food for thought. When a single member of staff initiates and takes responsibility for such an initiative, it must move with them if they move degree program. For 2013/14, six mentors have responsibility for a mentee cohort of twenty nine. It will be interesting and informative to analyse any significant differences or similarities in a smaller group.

Mentor recruitment occurred in March/ April of the previous academic year with training provided in April and August. Mentees are contacted prior to induction or Week Zero, with the aim being to improve enrolment conversion. New students are encouraged to feel 'part of the University' before entering the campus.

Both mentor and mentee must take responsibility in this process, and 'buy in'. There are expectations placed on both parties.

Expectations

***Expectations of the mentor*:**

•Minimum requirement of one hour per week invested
•Program for semester one only
•Organise a face to face meeting at the beginning and mid semester
•Contact with mentee via consistent weekly emails
•Support for mentors provided by member of staff
•Regular contact from staff to chart progress and deal with issues as they arise
•Role is not one of counsellor or tutor

Expectations of the mentee:

•To be automatically assigned a mentor
•Receive first contact prior to enrolment
•Receive a weekly email from mentor
•To not be obliged to meet their mentor
•To not be obliged to respond to emails
•Aim to aid adjustment to university life
•Opportunity to meet with other mentees in mentor group
•Experience of a student who has 'been through it'
•Knowledge that 'someone is there'

This last point is key. Many mentees responded that although they did not respond to the regular emails, or meet with their mentor, they felt supported knowing that 'someone was there', making regular contact and were 'there if needed'.

Training

Full mentor training is provided. This includes workshops from Student Support, Students Union, and practical training sessions on what is expected from the role. By the end of the sessions, students understand what mentoring is, but also what it is not [Figure 1].

Figure 1: possible definitions of mentoring (training session)

coaching	empathy	caring	development
honour	support	challenging	empower
induction	reliability	counselling	non-directive
guidance	genuine	honesty	appraising
questioning	solving problems	shoulder to cry on	confidentiality
friendship	sounding board	role model	encourage

This particular activity focuses on a range of descriptive words and students are asked to identify those words they believe to be central to the
mentoring process, those that they may be concerned about or that they believe are definitely not included in the mentor role. This is a valuable discussion point and helps tease out the defined role within the particular mentor program.
Students should understand what their role as mentor is, and how it differs from academic tutor or counsellor. They will also be aware of the details of the mentor program and how it works within the context of the specific undergraduate program. Students will also be aware of the skills required of a good mentor, and the departments and organisations within the University, their roles and the appropriate places to signpost mentees. It is at this point that any student may opt out of the program, now they know what is involved.
Students are made aware that they will also have a mentor in the form of the member of staff responsible for the program. Support for mentors was an important factor in the planning of the project, with the member of staff maintaining regular contact with mentors to chart progress and deal with any issues as they arise.
In the second cycle of the program, students were again recruited in the previous academic year. They had been mentees and had experienced the program's positive aspects, and were in a position to recognise the benefits.

Lessons Learnt

Mentors were emailed on a regular basis in order to track progress and identify problems at an early stage. They were encouraged to provide feedback on the project and their experiences. Mentees were also contacted via email, in order to assess the quality of their experience. Questionnaires were supplied to both mentors and mentees to gauge success of the pilot. These questionnaires were confidential, only being marked 'mentee' or 'mentor' The mentors felt it was a very positive experience and they gained confidence in their ability to communicate and deal with issues. They felt they gained a greater knowledge of the University and 'how it worked'. It was such a positive experience that some mentors wished to continue the role in the following year. Unfortunately, a minority of mentors did not fulfil the required commitment of one hour per week, and regular email contact, with some mentees never meeting their mentors. It was also difficult to achieve a gender balance in mentors/ mentees, but this can depend on the make up of the cohort.

Mentees agreed that being part of the program was a positive experience. They had the opportunity to meet other students, and make new friends within quite a daunting University experience. Mentees reported finding some aspects of the course difficult, but it helped to discuss their experience with the mentor. Fortunately, some mentees fully embraced the email contact and met with mentors on a regular basis.
In the pilot project, mentors were able to discuss undergraduate courses with mentees (Year Zero students), give tours, introduce them to studios and workshops. This also helped progression from Year Zero to Year One. Unfortunately, there was a range of experience for mentees, some of whom may not have received regular contact.

Food for thought

One of the aims of the project was to increase rates of retention. It can be difficult to define the impact on retention, as several other factors are involved, However the course attrition rate fell below the Faculty target:
2008/09 : 12.5%
2010/11: 8.2%
2011/12 : 10.1%
A peer mentor program has many benefits to all the students involved and may have a wider reach than just semester one of a course. It must be noted that it is an extra workload for the member of staff responsible, perhaps 'buy in' from other members of the course team would be beneficial. The selection of mentors can be crucial to the impact of the program, with those volunteering being put through a vetting process, and aiming to retain a gender balance where possible.

It can be a very positive experience for both mentors and mentees, and provides a formalised support network for the student experience. It builds confidence on both sides and can aid transition into University. The training increases knowledge of, and a sense of 'belonging' to the University. The introduction of a peer mentor program, with initial mentor/ mentee contact occurring prior to enrolment and induction can increase conversion at enrolment, enhance a sense of belonging, and have a positive impact on retention.
"When such practices are introduced in the initial stages of a course, students are more likely to settle down, be satisfied with their experience, and benefit socially and academically. They will also feel less isolated, and less likely to withdraw." (Bingham & Daniels, 1998, p114).

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An Evaluation of Virtual Worlds to Engage Distance Learning Students

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Abstract

Using the delivery of a large postgraduate distance learning module in ethics as an illustrative example, the types of learning activity that could be enhanced through delivery in a virtual world (VW) are explored. The weekly classes included problem-based learning, seminars, and a committee discussion. Participation in the virtual activities was optional but over 40% of the cohort created avatars. Two thirds of responders agreed that the VW sessions helped them develop their communication skills and over 60% felt that it promoted engagement with the module. However the introduction of any new technology presents challenges to both staff and students, therefore the barriers to using virtual worlds are also described.

Introduction

Rationale

Distance learning (DL) provides a route for students to update their skills, engage with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and gain employment or promotion opportunities through flexible part-time study. The School of Biomedical Science has been at the forefront of the development of such programmes delivering a range of courses for professional development in the health sciences. These programmes use the Blackboard Learn Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to deliver core content, however the existing VLE has limited opportunities for constructive or social learning. It was envisaged that the use of an immersive world would provide the opportunity to deliver constructive and social learning activities to these students. The aim of this Higher Education Academy funded project was to develop a virtual campus, containing flexible learning spaces that could replicate on-campus social learning activities including poster presentations, seminars, and problem-based learning.

Virtual Worlds

Immersive or virtual worlds (VWs) are 3 dimensional spaces in which the individual is represented by an avatar. Unlike game based virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft or console games such as Wii and Xbox, there are no specific objectives or narrative for the avatar to act out. Virtual worlds provide an empty space in which individuals create their own environment; these can be realistic, such as a virtual laboratory (Cashmore et al, 2013) or a virtual patient (Heaney et al, 2010) or pseudo-realistic, such as the ability to dissect a 3D frog (Lucas, 2011) or explore electronic circuits (Callaghan et al, 2013).Customisable avatars navigate their world using mouse and keyboard strokes and use text and voice modules to communicate with each other in real time. VW's have the potential to enrich student learning environments, providing opportunities for engagement in challenging learning tasks and to encourage and enhance interaction and dialogue by students (Monahan, McArdle & Bertolotto, 2008). The potential of immersive 3D worlds in education was quickly recognised, with early adopters using VWs to replicate classroom activities, shortly followed by their use to deliver constructive and social learning activities, facilitating role-play and creating learning experiences which would not be practical or safe in a real life environment (Huang, Rauch & Liawc, 2010; Girvin & Savage, 2008).VWs can therefore provide the opportunity for students to engage in 'real world' activities and develop their

employability skills in communication and team-working by virtue of the ability to have synchronous discussions within a spatial dimension.

OpenSim

The OpenSim platform was chosen for this project as it has distinct advantages over other options such as renting space in Second Life®; it provides greater control over access; improved security and a predictable cost-base. This open source multi-user platform has no fee associated with uploads and there is no physical limit to the number of 'rooms' in the 'campus'. By using OpenSim, the project has greater potential for scalability both in terms of access (i.e. the number of avatars/students) and the development of new learning resources. This option did require the purchase of a dedicated high-specification server, which is hosted within the School of Biomedical Sciences.

Technological challenges

In order to enter the BioSim campus, users have to download and install a virtual world viewer, and a voice module; for the bulk of this project we used Imprudence (http://wiki.kokuaviewer.org/wiki/Imprudence:Downloads (viewer) and Whisper (http://whisper.vcomm.ch/forum/) (voice), both of these pieces of software are open source, and free to use. Some participants had problems installing the requisite software, and gave us very useful feedback which allowed us to make further refinements to the guidelines. 40% of students had problems installing the voice module, whisper, and 30% of students could not hear or speak when they first went into the virtual world. 49% of students who had problems with the installation process resolved this though reading the user guide. Although it was clear that the problems with the voice module could be resolved through the use of resources such as the user guide and FAQ, students only used these resources as a last resort. A search of on-line chat rooms and blogs identified an alternative to Whisper, Vivox, which was freely available to small non-profit grid operators. The BioSim server was reconfigured to use Vivox (http://support.vivox.com/opensim/), reducing the number of installation steps for users.

Once the participants had the software installed and created their avatar they did not report any issues with navigating the virtual world and communicating with other avatars. The use of the virtual world does require time and effort to set up and it is important that users are aware of this, i.e. they should have all the software installed and test the communication tools prior to the scheduled start time of any activity. Furthermore participants require access to a fairly modern computer, audio equipment and a reliable broadband connection. As with the introduction of any technology, there is a learning curve for users, and clearly some participants are more comfortable engaging with new technology than others so it is important that these users are provided with a range of support mechanisms, including user guides and personal support.

Illustrative example: Delivering bioethics via distance learning to postgraduate life and health science students

Pedagogical Background

BioSim was used to deliver bioethics to a group of post-graduate DL students. The aim of the module was to encourage students to examine the ethical issues raised by advances in the life and health sciences. Central to the module is the ability to construct and defend evidenced-based arguments and appreciating alternative viewpoints; this requires interaction.

Student Engagement

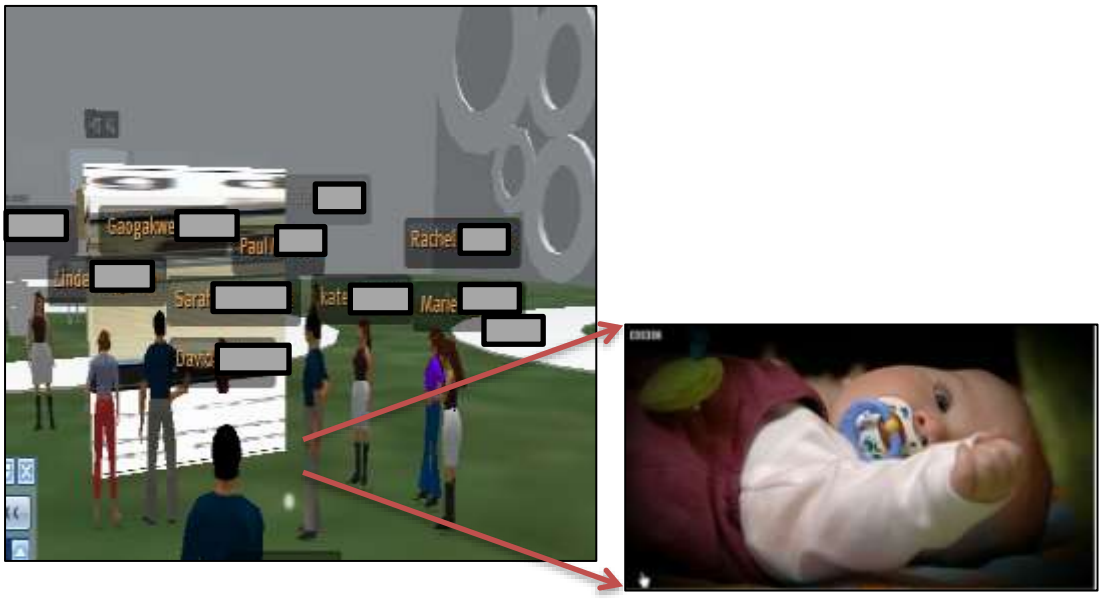
There was an activity scheduled each week in the virtual world, these included: module introduction, assessment feedback, PBL activities and a virtual committee. All activities were voluntary, 44/94 students created avatars and 25 engaged in activities, with 14 regular attendees. The following sections describe the PBL activity and the virtual committee.

Problem-based Learning (PBL)

Two PBL activities were carried out in-world:

1. 'Enviropig'- the development of genetically modified pigs that have a reduced environmental impact;
2. Should egg and sperm donors be paid the same?

For each scenario the trigger comprised of either a single video or a series of short videos providing alternative stakeholder perspectives, which were released at stages during the exercise. The videos were screened in the virtual world from public resources such as Youtube and the BBC iPlayer . The students, working in groups of 6-8 watched the video triggers together 'in-world' and then discussed the issues arising. A series of slides were available as prompts to provide some focus and structure to the discussion; encouraging them to define the problem and formulate their learning objectives. Additional resources were also provided in the E-Library. (Figures 1 (a), (b) and (c)).



(a)

(b) (c)

Figure 1: PBL in a virtual world. (a) Students watch a video clip trigger (insert), (b) Slides provided to scaffold the PBL process and **(**c) 3 students are delegated to access further information to inform the problem construction

Virtual Committee Meeting

In this assessed activity, students review research proposals through an 'ethics committee'. The students are expected to identify the risks and benefits of the proposed research as well as other ethical issues raised by the proposal such as confidentiality, autonomy, and fairness. Previously, students were provided with the research proposal and asked to discuss the issues via the message board over a 1 week period and reach a committee decision. The problem identified with this approach was that whilst students read the required material and formulated their own response; there was little evidence of engagement with other 'committee members', or attempts to reach a consensus decision.

Figure 2 shows a screenshot from the VLE discussion board, showing that the majority of students only made 1 posting, and often did not read the other postings. It was felt that by holding the committee in the virtual world, it would more closely replicate a real committee, and promote interaction, discussion and decision making.
As with other activities, participation in the virtual committee was voluntary; students could elect to undertake this assessment either via the discussion board or the virtual world. Times and dates were set for the committee meetings and the students volunteered for specific roles, such as chair, secretary, key reviewer and researchers. Three research ethics applications were reviewed by virtual committee, and 14 students participated in the virtual committee.

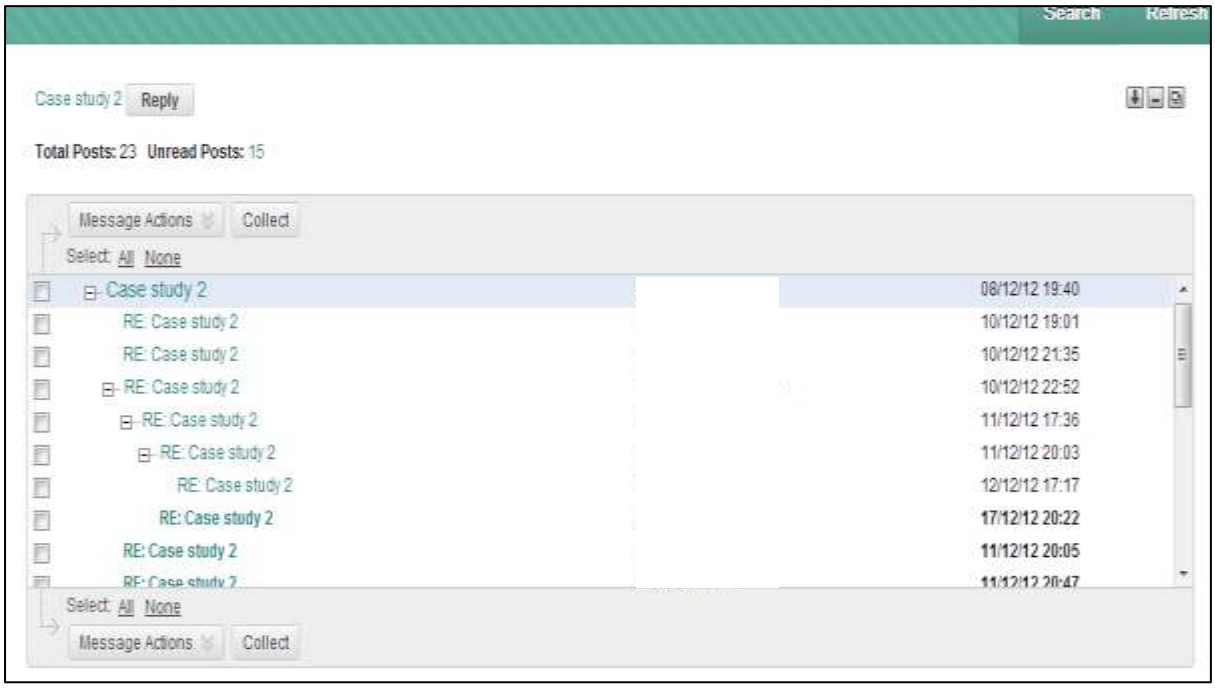


Figure 2: Engagement with the research ethics committee via the discussion board

Student Feedback

A questionnaire was developed which asked students how well they agreed or disagreed with twelve statements relating to three areas: skill development (communication and presenting ethical arguments), engagement with the module and subject knowledge. 19 students responded to the questionnaire and the responses were collated and shown in Figure 3. The majority of students agreed that the virtual world engaged them with their learning and helped them develop their communication skills. There were six positive responses in the 'free-text section' regarding the use of BioSim, typical examples were:
"Really enjoyed the video discussions. The virtual world interaction was particularly good for this type of exercise"
"I believe that using avatars would help to give all group work members the confidence to engage more fully with their colleagues."
"'I was initially sceptical of the value of VWs and using avatars but when I engaged in the discussion I was surprised at the level of involvement that the environment drew from me. This type of Learning environment is definitely more engaging than online discussions and chat forums that are common in distance-learning courses.'
Whilst, one of the eTutors commented:

"…the virtual world has the great potential to give the distance learner a more personal feel and a less isolated experience to their educational experience. This should help with motivation and general morale which should in turn lead to a better performance from a distance learning cohort"
It was recognized that there was a learning curve for both staff and students in using the technology, and there were two negative comments from students who struggled with the technology:
"I enjoyed the Biosim discussions even though there were many teething problems" and "Biosim problems need to be sorted".

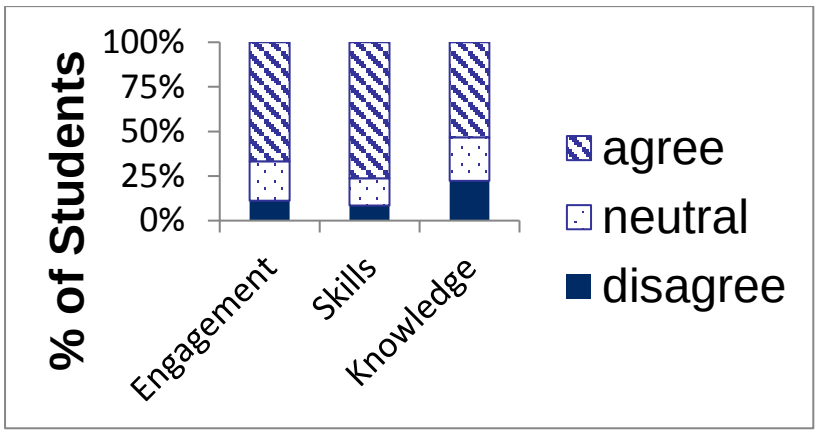


Figure 3: Student Feedback on the use of the BioSim Campus to engage students with their learning, develop subject knowledge and communication skills.

Lessons learnt
The introduction of technology requires an investment of time by both staff and students, it is therefore important to ensure that the proposed intervention will have real educational benefits. The use of virtual worlds to deliver distance learning appears to be an attractive option for providing realistic, social learning activities which engage students and goes some way to replicating the on-campus experience. Selected activities such as the seminar on providing assignment guidelines and assignment feedback were well-attended, and provided an opportunity for real engagement, however alternative technologies are available for this type of activity. It is important that in-world activities warrant the investment of time and effort and offer students and staff something that cannot be delivered using simpler alternative technology. Both the PBL and the virtual committee provided an opportunity for interaction and the development of a sense of community. In the virtual committee, students were much more expressive and provided examples from their own experiences, whereas the written responses on the discussion board were typically much more formal and clearly 'scripted'. Importantly, in both the virtual committee and the PBL there was a real sense of debate and discussion which was not observed on the discussion board. As with any teaching intervention, those responsible for programme delivery need to be confident that proposed changes will not disadvantage any students, therefore in this pilot study the BioSim Campus was not used for core content delivery and learning activities. The robustness of the system has now been fully tested and the user guides refined so it could be used to deliver core content and assessment activities. Currently, there is a focus in higher education on retention and support for the less able student; however in 2007 the HEA identified a need for differentiated learning to stretch the most able students (Freestone, 2013). My experience with the virtual campus has convinced me that this could be an effective

resource to engage and stretch the most able students in a cohort. However, some students continue to have antipathy towards technology enhanced learning and as such engagement with the virtual campus for the Bioethics module will remain voluntary.

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"It's just a Derry/ Londonderry Month" ... Critical reflections on the Social Work Transition Project

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Abstract

The article focuses on a critical review of the Transition Project which was initiated by the Social Work Department in 2010 and culminated in the transfer of a cohort of final year students from two Further and Higher Education (FHE) institutions in 2012. The Transition Project was established to facilitate the transfer of social work students who had undertaken two years study in two FHE partner institutions to the final year of the Social Work program at Magee. The aims of the Transition Project were:

1. To provide an orientation to the Social Work program.
2. To introduce students to learning resources at Magee.
3. To address student concerns about the transfer.
4. To develop relationships with key staff in advance.

In reviewing the process of the student engagement through this transition period and detailing the procedures undertaken, several key areas will be addressed:

- A contextual background is provided to facilitate an historical understanding of the project.
- An outline of the conceptual framework underpinning student engagement is identified, drawing on the key lessons from international literature.
- A critical review of the transition project including its implementation, and identification of good practice initiatives is undertaken
- An exploration of the student perspectives, identifying their concerns about the transition is highlighted and the formal evaluation of the student experience is included.
- The final section considers an overview of the learning from this experience and lessons for implementation for future groups of students.

Contextual background

Since the inception of a graduate degree for Social Work in 2003, Ulster has been involved in Collaborative Partnerships with four Further Education Institutes. All of the institutes delivered the initial two years of the degree and one of the FHE institutes was approved to offer the final year of Degree in Social Work. As part of the Revalidation of the Social Work Degree in 2009, the Collaborative Partnership arrangements were reviewed by the University and reduced from four partner Institutes to two, reflecting regional rationalisation of the Degree in Social Work. Following extensive negotiations with senior staff, it was agreed that the final year of the Degree in Social Work would only be offered on the Magee campus. In effect, although students had been able to complete their final year at Belfast Metropolitan College, this option was withdrawn and plans were initiated to transfer a cohort of 63 students with effect from 2012. At the outset, several challenges needed to be addressed. Students faced practical issues associated with the geographic disruption in travelling to the North West. Equally as they had not been involved in the original decision making process there was potential for resistance and ambivalence in the student group, even though the transfer was clearly publicised in their offer of a place on the course. Consequently the Social Work Department and FHE institutes were faced with multiple challenges related to ensuring students involved in making the transition would be able to

identify with the new academic environment and would experience opportunities to co-locate their learning experience within a large student cohort and would establish support networks.

Conceptual framework

The current emphasis on student engagement has its genesis in contemporary policy initiatives in Higher Education as well as commissioned Little et al report (2009) on student engagement. The latter study was undertaken specifically to examine institutional and student union practices and processes designed to enhance student's engagement with their own learning. One noteworthy aspect was that students were regarded more as consumers of education rather than partners in learning experience. Interestingly, the authors considered that models of student engagement concentrate primarily on institutional practices for eliciting student feedback through questionnaires, and representation on student staff consultative committees (Little et al 2009:15) Within the space of five years, this concept of student engagement has evolved into considerations of personalised learning, collaborative learning and connected learning experiences delivered through both a digital highway and face to face engagement. (Edwards 2013). In addition, Trowler et al (2010:12) opine that student engagement needs to be framed within individual student learning, student engagement with institutional structures and processes and specifically engagement with identity of their institutions.

Lefever and Bashir (2011:1) extend this thinking further. They contend that creating a sense of belonging involves "social belonging" to other students as well as cohort identity and developing a sense of ease with the wider campus, gaining a familiarity with the geographic space. Understanding how student engagement incorporates a multidimensional quality, raises issues about how best to respond to their needs in a way which takes cognisance of the wider spacial and social connectedness. They argue that for students to experience shared responsibility for engagement, engagement needs to be seen as integral to learning. If this is addressed effectively it can lead to improvement in learning outcomes. In addition, if student representation is felt to be effective and students are involved in governance aspects of institutional processes there are benefits for all parties. The authors also note that successful transition requires full engagement of students although there is no agreed model for establishing how successful transitions should be achieved. What does emerge however is a clear emphasis on principles associated with partnership working; shared engagement regarding curriculum design and delivery; shared agreements about assessment modes, and transparency about marking criteria as well as explicit articulation about expected outcomes. It is against this backdrop that the transition group was initiated.

Phases involved in establishing transition group

Drawing on best practice evidence from an international review of student engagement, (Trowler 2010) a project group was established in September 2010 to co-ordinate the management of the transition process. The initial group was comprised of senior staff, course directors, students union, student services, Faculty administration, Subject Partnership Manager. Plans were agreed for an orientation visit in May 2011 and student representatives were subsequently invited to transition group meetings during 2011/12. Trowler et al (2010) suggest that student engagement with identity is one of three aspects associated with successful transitions. They also advocate that one of the central tenets of engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Using such principles as involving students in the transition process, and focusing on establishing identification with other students and staff at Magee, created the foundations for the transition project. Initially the membership of the transition group involved academic and academic support staff, such as Faculty staff, Student Support, Students Union but its composition evolved to include student representatives. The transition process centred around two key events related to an orientation of students to the Magee campus and student group and further orientation to the learning resources and experience of a lecture. The first visit was scheduled for March 2012 and included an all day program structured around an introduction to other students who were already in year one and based full time at Magee. The transferring students were allocated to mixed groups and the orientation was organised around group activities such as ice breakers and a campus orientation based on a quiz about local sources and key locations.

Feedback from students about the initial orientation phase had been negative because the introductory visit did not address their concerns about accommodation and they had expectations that there would be more emphasis on module content. In addressing their concerns directly through face to face engagement with the student cohorts via subject partnership meetings and involving student representatives on the transition group, subsequent planning for the transition progressed more effectively. The second visit in May 2012 was organised around a specialist lecture on a current topic related to child protection.

Revised orientation preparation introduced for 2013

Based on student feedback from the 2012 cohort, the orientation process in was extended to include an “in situ” visit by Student Support to explain the student support process at Ulster and a presentation by the Subject Partnership Manager to explain the placement allocation process. This visit was undertaken prior to the orientation visit to Magee in May 2013. On this occasion, students were introduced to the course director who discussed the modules, the assessment process and the timetable .In addition the orientation process was extended to include an introduction to learning resources and the delivery of specialist lecture by subject expert to illustrate how curriculum would be delivered and applied to practice. A further significant development involved a question and answer session facilitated by existing students who had transferred to Magee.

Critical review of Transition Project
In reviewing the transition project specific attention is given to student perspectives.

Implementation phase
From the outset, from discussions in the Transition group meetings with student representatives, it was obvious that students who were transferring to Magee had multiple of concerns:

- Practical considerations such as accommodation, timetabling, transport especially as there was no rail transport from Belfast for the entire academic year and
- Concerns about their integration with existing cohort of students,
- Concerns about achieving standards of academic competence especially utilising feedback from assessment to enhance their learning.
- They also expressed concerns about moving from small group to large group with concomitant fears being lost in big group and losing peer support.
- In addition, they were worried about the geographic location of practice learning placements, especially about additional travel to the practice learning sites.

Efforts to address their practical considerations included providing lists of local accommodation to allow students to make decisions about whether they would travel or stay in the local area, adjusting the timetable to condense teaching to three full days thus minimising the need for daily travel and clarifying the options for daily travel to Magee (in effect the teaching timetable was reconfigured to 36 days (hence the title of the article). These underlying needs resonated with an understanding of Maslow's (1943) psychological theory of developmental psychology. In recognising how the potential change process of the transition project triggered the hierarchy of needs, the transition group was able to pay close attention to the "hierarchy of needs" model identified by Maslow and in addressing student concerns, anxieties were reduced as evidenced through feedback from the class representatives.
Students were allocated to tutorial groups from their existing cohorts thus maintaining social networks and existing supporting systems. Details about previous academic profiles and progression had been conveyed through practice learning profiles completed by tutors in the FHE sector so student learning needs related to professional development had been articulated in a jointly agreed summary which was available for the newly appointed tutor. This document served to provide an introductory profile of the student and offered an opportunity to review future practice learning needs. However, the profile did not indicate academic learning needs related to such aspects as capacity for critical reflection and evaluation and students welcomed opportunities to discuss their academic performance and receive feedback about the quality of their coursework. Such learning issues had not been identified in the initial stages of the transition project but their emergence points to the need to provide a holistic approach to student transition which takes cognisance of both the personal, professional and academic learning framework. Feedback from students about this phase also suggests that students struggle to position themselves academically in a new context and have concerns about the extent to which their performance fits within existing standards. Drawing on an evidence base from a series of project approaches to improving student retention Thomas 2012) conceptualises these processes as helping students to develop a strong sense of belonging which arises from engagement. She emphasises key features of each stage for example in relation to belonging , and she suggests that students

who have concerns about fitting in or fears about their tacit knowledge being undervalued, will need to develop interpersonal relationships to satisfy their need to belong. Significantly, interventions to support retention efforts need to include “developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners” (Thomas 2012:15).
Equally, the challenges of teaching large groups have exercised the staff team since the revalidation of the Social Work degree in 2009. Teaching and assessment methods have been continually revised to maximise learning and application to practice and web based resources have been developed to support learning. However efforts to pay attention to the group processes have been less consistent because of a number of unforeseen and unexpected operational factors such as staff illness and resource constraints. It would have been helpful to focus attention to the group process because it has the potential to encourage the development of effective networks as well as opportunities for building social capital. This latter aspect is highlighted in Thomas’s report particularly when he identifies that the process involves building links with “peers, current students and staff” (Thomas 2012:22). Specific reference is made of the support and development needs of social work students in the process of professional development (Thomas 2012: 66).

Findings from formal evaluation of transition project

Unfortunately, despite efforts to ensure that the final year students who had transferred from the FHE sector could complete the National Student Survey, this was not possible because students transferring to Higher Education sites are not included in the cohort identified for the survey. So it had not been possible to obtain formal feedback about students’ experience of their experience as final year students on the Social Work program at Magee.
In an attempt to rectify this situation a questionnaire was developed to gain feedback from transferring students who had participated in the Transition Project. The structure of the questionnaire was based on the areas covered by the National Student Survey and utilised a Likert scale of 1-5 as well as qualitative comments. Questionnaires were circulated to students on line during the last week of term with a return date scheduled for the final meeting with the staff team to complete summary of learning profiles required by the Regulatory Body. The total response rate was 25% n= 16 and this comprised 80% n= 10 from one FHE cohort and 10% n= 6 from the larger FHE group. The poor response may be explained by the timing of the questionnaire but students also said they had forgotten to bring their completed forms and also indicated that they would forward the questionnaires. On reflection, it may have been more relevant to replicate the NSS survey conditions as the main cohort responses for the Social Work degree were 86% in 2013.

Confirmation of Findings

Overall level of satisfaction	3.9
Teaching	4.5
assessment methods	3.9
Assessment feedback	3.8
Tutorial support	4.1
Management and course organisation	4.1

Students' Scores

Practice learning arrangements	4.8
Recall days	3.1
Tripartite meetings with tutor and practice teacher	4.3

Positive comments were included about the quality of teaching and tutorial support

"As a transition student, I noticed a big difference in the overall organisation and presentation of lectures. The facilities in Magee were excellent, vast range of resources, and excellent communication by email keeping us up to date with lecture material. The teaching was on course and sufficient material available promptly. Lectures were organised with precision..."

"Tutors were very approachable and willing to provide guidance and support if required".

"Lecturers were approachable and willing in their approach and also easy to contact through email if necessary. This really helped final year go more smoothly and successfully".

"I felt that as a transferring student, I was made to feel welcome and given the support I needed to progress. I felt particularly supported during placement and thought that it was essential and less daunting that my tutor was present during tripartite meetings. I expected that moving from a small group to a large class, I would become unnoticed and there would not be the same personal aspect between my tutor and I however this was proven in accurate"

"Tutorial support was fabulous and was great form of support to me on my placement and throughout my final year in Magee. This support meant the world to me."

"This has been such an easy transition whereby we were made to feel at ease".

What are the gaps in provision?

"I cannot identify any gaps, as I truly believe my experience of being a student at Magee was well structured and enjoyable. I would highly recommend this campus as the student support has been excellent and communication with my personal tutor has been excellent".

Some students cited the apparent emphasis on child care teaching, library resources and attention to group dynamics. "Magee students were not placed in groups with transferring students in ... This left transferring students with a disadvantage of working with people they did not know while Magee students worked with their previous class mates. This did not aid in amalgamating the class..."

What needs improvement for future transition groups?

Several students cited class interaction, student behaviour and group dynamics such as students not attending regularly or being signed in by other students.

"Managing group dynamics, people talking in class is very disruptive"

Some students felt there should be more guidance about assessments, with more detailed and specific feedback and several students cited more tutorial support.

Suggestions to improve future preparation included disseminating student testimonials to prospective students transferring to Magee, "to give potential new students a tangible, first-hand experience of the transition",

"Adjusting the timetable to accommodate students who were travelling, increasing student participation in the pre-entry phase"

"Entering into more dialogue with students surrounding their apprehension about the move may help ease uncertainty"

"Personal counts of previous students who transferred from ...would have aided my experience as you have first-hand account of someone in a similar position to do this"

"Every effort was made to ease this transition; it was talked about on initial start of the degree program and throughout. University visit was organised twice to enable students to be aware of the campus and its location"

Lessons for the future

Several issues have emerged which relate to student support and engagement. Bearing in mind, earlier references to the transfer of academic information it would appear that the project needs to have more effective processes in place for the identification of student support needs and assessment of educational support required. Synchronising ongoing support across different academic sectors has posed challenges for ensuring assessments of educational needs. In effect, this has led to delays in securing support packages and has impacted on the continuity of academic support.

Recognising the ongoing needs for induction and orientation beyond pre entry will enhance the students' transition to a new learning environment. In light of the large student cohorts in final year, it is incumbent upon academic staff to consider group processes that may impact on students' personal learning capacity. However in the context of professional training, there is equally a concomitant commitment for students to exercise personal responsibility in pursuit of their professional development so a shared sense of engagement in a learning process has to be predicated upon this dual responsibility.

In the final analysis, on the basis of the formal feedback (with the limitations in relation to response rates) the transition project has achieved successful outcomes for the first cohort of final year students who transferred to the final year of the Social Work degree at Magee in 2012/13. Ongoing monitoring and review of the processes underpinning the transition will enhance student engagement and enable continued critical reflection. Particular emphasis will be placed on developing the capacity of student representatives through training offered by the Student's Union to contribute to the orientation process. It is also envisaged that transferring students will participate in the review of the transition process, co-facilitating the orientation program and promoting ways to enhance the student experience. Equally attention needs to be focused on preparing the established Magee based student cohorts for the learning and teaching which takes place in seminar groups and group work, setting foundations in place for the merger of the transferring students and co-working opportunities.

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It's a journey not a destination

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Abstract

This paper reports on the work of the Ulster's PDP forum over the first two years of its strategic plan, an important precursor of which was to ensure that there was, and is, a consensus on how teaching staff perceive and develop personal development planning (PDP) within their respective disciplines. The paper reports our evaluation of student perspectives on the process of PDP under the three themes of "*Self Review, Skill Development and Successful Transitions"* and shows that in practice, students are positive about their PDP experiences. These results provide a good foundation on which to build future PDP strategic trajectories but it should be noted that future employability strategies must take account of staff concerns about integration, packed curricula and ever-increasing demands for administrative and pedagogic transparency.

Introduction

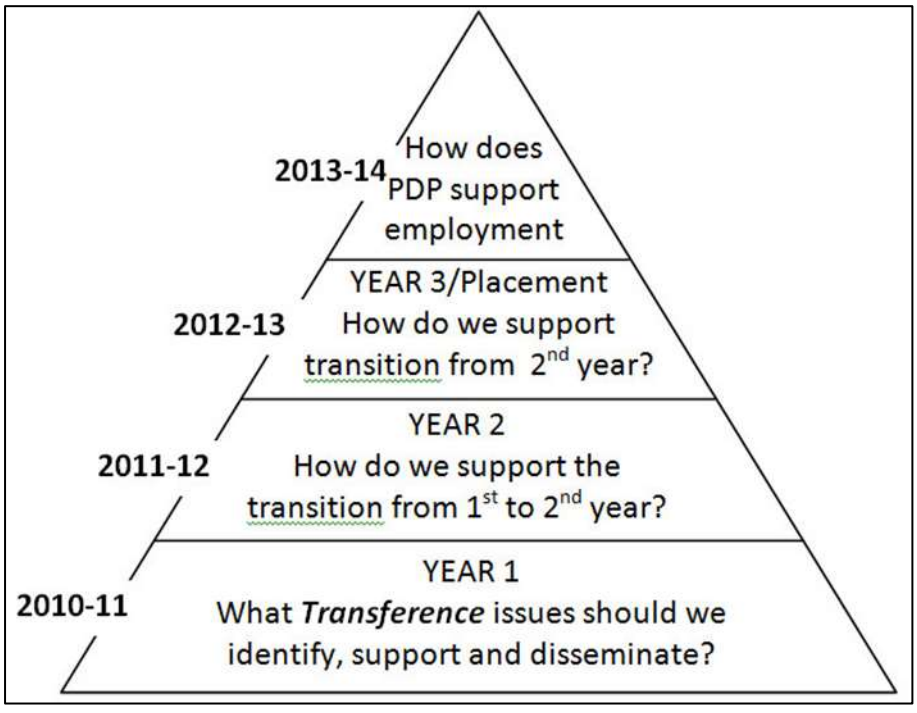
The current agenda around Personal Development Planning (PDP) originates from the Dearing report of 1997 (Dearing, 1997) and has developed in various ways across a range of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Today, it is almost unthinkable for HEIs to focus solely on research and teaching and not to consider a robust role in enhancing student employability (Bloxham *et al.,* 2007). PDP at the University of Ulster has had a varied and often difficult history where activities related to PDP and employability had often been confused with the PDSystem, the software programme that had been developed to support it (now referred to as the PACE system). Coupled with that confusion, a significant number of teaching staff were less than convinced of the efficacy of PDP (McNair, 2009). There can be a range of reasons for teaching staff not embracing PDP. Stefani (2005, p.4), argues that if "…academic staff do not see the 'reward' for engaging in CPD…" and hence have problems in engaging in reflective practices, this reduces the *perceived* rewards of helping students engage in PDP. It can also be seen as an additional activity, creating extra work (Moir *et al*., 2006), which takes up teaching time. PDP may be perceived as externally imposed and therefore less relevant to day-to-day teaching (*ibid.,* 2006). QAA guidelines, intended to support the implementation of Dearing and allow HEIs to structure their PDP strategies, seemed to reinforce the view that PDP was an imposed agenda. Inevitably, as HEIs began to develop structured approaches to PDP, the 'imposition' prescriptive became increasingly difficult to ignore.

Between 2008 and 2011, PDP at Ulster, in keeping with other UK universities, had a distinct identity, influenced in part by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines published in 2009 (QAA, 2009) and the publication of its PDP Tool Kit (QAA, 2011). In order to promote this lifelong learning culture and to avoid the sense of imposition among staff, the University of Ulster developed a 'Forum' approach. Representatives from each faculty were asked to contribute to PDP development and convey faculty uptake issues and colleagues' views and concerns in an attempt to build consensus while at the same time developing the PDP mandate. Since its inception in February 2008, the PDP Forum, keeping a strategic eye on internal and external PDP developments, set up a programme of events to inform, disseminate and coordinate support strategies and materials across the University. However, the PDP landscape is changing. Its processes and outcomes are being subsumed

into emerging employability agendas and other UK-wide initiatives such as Key Information Sets (KIS), the Higher Education Assessment Report (HEAR) and the aim of developing Graduate Qualities (HEA, 2011). The growing challenge therefore is to ensure that teaching staff see PDP in a more integrated way so that students can make meaningful advances in their own capacity to develop a wide range of employability and other lifelong learning skills while learning their respective discipline skills and content.

The PDP Forum therefore attempted to develop PDP along two strands, First, a strategic plan (illustrated in figure 1 below), was needed to provide an evidence-based approach to the development of PDP across a four-year timescale. The strategic plan had two aims, to develop our understanding of current PDP good practice and to identify areas for development. Surveys and cross-faculty trawls and events helped build a university-wide picture of PDP implementation with particular focus on each year group, in turn. This emphasis on each year group seemed a sensible way to understand PDP and to advise University policy. Over the four years, it was hoped, the Forum would have an holistic overview as well as detailed knowledge about how PDP should be applied in each year, with particular emphasis on transitions.

Figure 1

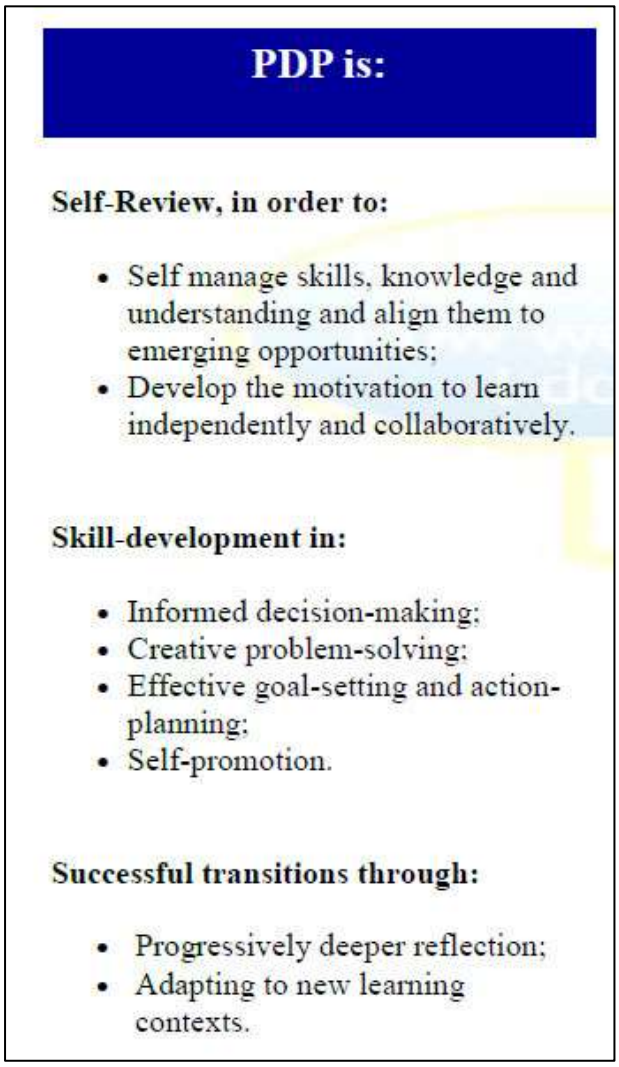


Second, it was important to anticipate how PDP might look in light of the emerging employability agenda and the development of graduate qualities at Ulster between 2010 and 2012. PDP was defined by QAA as:

> "…a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process, open to all learners, in all HE provision settings, and at all levels." (QAA, 2009, p.2)

This somewhat unhelpful PDP definition promoted by QAA needed to be translated into more practical language. The statement was used to draw out existing good practice across the University in the form of case studies (subsequently published on the PDP website, http://pdp.ulster.ac.uk). Additionally, by scoping good practice from other HEIs and taking note of current trends in PDP implementation from the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA), the QAA definition was translated into a set of explicit statements that could be operationalized in teaching and learning contexts across a wide range of disciplines. The statements, summarised under three themes of "*Self Review, Skill Development and Successful Transitions"* seemed to allow appropriate delineation of the most effective PDP processes and those teaching and learning activities most likely to be attractive to busy teaching staff (illustrated in Figure 2 below):

Figure 2



The three strands were circulated to all teaching staff in June 2012 as a guide to supporting PDP, copies of which can be found on the PDP website. Initial feedback suggested that while it is important to ensure that curricular content and accompanying teaching strategies need to take account of PDP and the other emerging initiatives, studies advice may also

provide an established and appropriate forum for one-to-one and group discussions on the development of discipline-related employability skills.

Aim

This paper will report on the work of the forum over the first two years of its strategic plan, an important precursor of which was to ensure that there was, and is, a consensus on how teaching staff perceive and develop PDP within their respective disciplines. The paper will report our evaluation of student perspectives on PDP process under the three themes introduced above and show that in practice, students are positive about their PDP experiences. We will argue that the data provides a good foundation on which to build future PDP strategic trajectories but that future employability strategies must take account of staff concerns about integration, packed curricula and ever-increasing demands for administrative and pedagogic transparency.

Methodology

In the two year period between 2011-2012 the PDP Forum carried out a cross-sectional survey across all faculties, exploring student experiences of PDP with 15 Schools/Departments representing 51 undergraduate programmes. Students were surveyed regarding the personal development planning opportunities on their degree course through the use of a questionnaire exploring the three themes of student experience: *self-review, skills development and successful transition*. These themes were examined in detail through six areas: potential for learning; planning your development; skills development; transition from school/understanding employability; personal development and reflective practice. At the end of each set of closed questions an open-ended question asked the student to summarise their experience in relation to that topic. A four point likert scale was used, 1 = a lot, 2 = to some extent, 3 = little, 4 = not at all. To maximise response, questionnaires were completed by students in class and a total of 957 responses were received. 587 first year students completed the questionnaire in 2011 and 370 second year students completed the questionnaire in 2012. While students in second year were not necessarily the same students that engaged with the survey the previous year, it was hoped that their experiences would be similar and that their views would represent PDP provision more generally. The surveys, conducted in accordance with the University's ethical guidelines, were conducted with full informed consent, with no personally identifying data collected and participant anonymity assured. For the purposes of reporting in this paper and for clarity we present the qualitative data that refers only to the two likert elements 'a lot' or 'to some extent'.

Following from the student surveys, in 2013, a short exploratory qualitative questionnaire was sent out to staff asking their perceptions, as placement tutors, the extent to which PDP supports placement. The purpose of this questionnaire was to inform the design of a more detailed questionnaire for 3rd and 4th year students. Responses were received from a total of 13 Schools representing all faculties within the University.

Results

Student perceptions:

Under the theme of *self-review* which explored how students are able to evaluate their potential and plan and support their personal development, a very positive picture emerged. A total of 87% (N=511) of these respondents in 1st year and 80% (N=296) in 2nd year reported that their course helped them to develop their self-management skills. 84% of students in 1st year (N=493) and 81% in 2nd year (N=322), reported that they were helped to

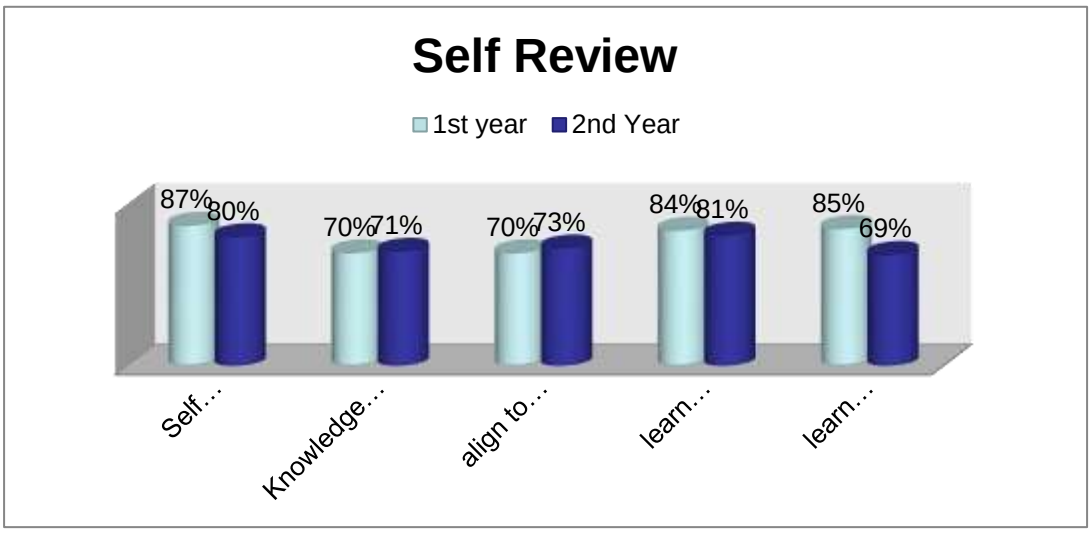
learn independently. Similarly 85% in 1st year (N=499) and 69% in 2nd year (N=255) reported that they were encouraged to learn collaboratively (illustrated in Figure 3 below).

In the open ended question the students spoke positively about their abilities to self-manage and learn independently, demonstrating that PDP processes have been supporting students to evaluate their potential and plan and support their personal development.

"My time at university has provided me with experience in meeting deadlines and the importance of independent learning. This improved my skills such as organisation, research, team working and self-preservation". (UBS student).

> "I felt it was expected of me to know how to do independent learning from the beginning so I felt a lack of guidance...but it has allowed me to be a bit creative in my approach to learning, I now feel stronger as a person" (ADBE student).
>
> "Regular comprehensive feedback has helped me to assess my strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvements. Study skills class … were extremely useful as I previously did not understand referencing and researching" (Life & Health Sciences student).

Figure 3



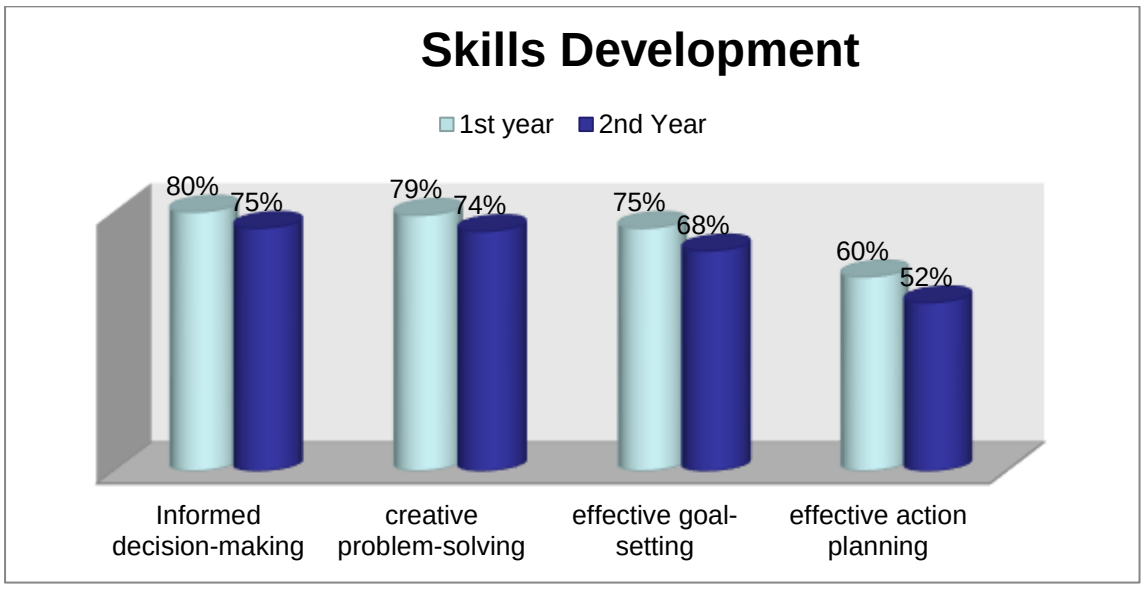
Under the theme of *skills development* a positive picture also emerged. A total of 80% of 1st year (N=470) and 75% of 2nd year (N=278) respondents reported that they were helped to develop the skills of informed decision making. Similarly 79% of 1st year (N=464) and 74% of 2nd year students (N=274) reported that they were able to develop creative problem solving techniques, and 75% (N=440) of 1st and 68% (N=252) of 2nd year students reported that they were able to develop effective goal setting. A slightly lower percentage 60% 1st year (N=352) and 52% of 2nd year (N=192) reported developing effective action planning (illustrated in Figure 4 below).
In the open ended question the students spoke positively about the skills that they have been developing, demonstrating that many students are confident that their courses are providing opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills.

‘I want to get a better job when I leave university. I think skills I am learning on my course will help with that” (UBS student)

“I have received good feedback on opportunities on how to do better in coursework progress and in presentations. I have used this feedback to set new targets for myself” (Social Sciences student)

“I have learnt a lot from my first and second year, with working in groups I have developed skills like problem solving, being more confident in my own opinion” (Computing and Engineering student)

Figure 4



The final theme explored successful transitions through reflective practice and understanding of employability. It revealed that 68% (N=399) of students in 1st year and 69% (N=255) in 2nd year reported that as the year continued they developed progressively deeper reflection. Similarly 68% in both years reported that they were able to adapt to newer learning contexts (illustrated in Figure 5 below).

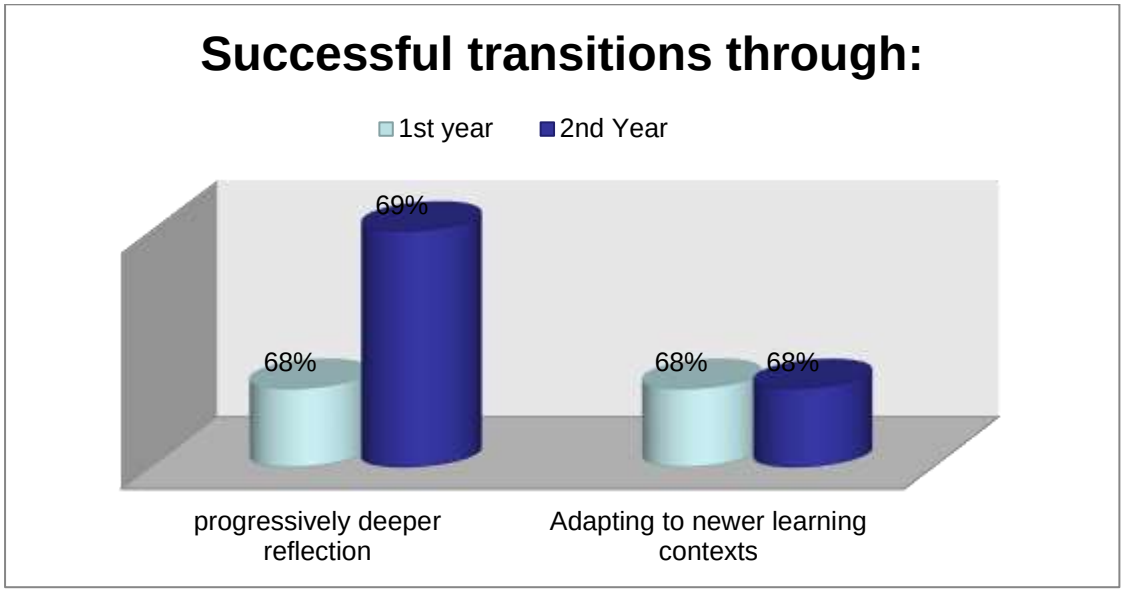
In the open-ended question the students spoke positively about their abilities demonstrating that students believe that their course is helping them to develop reflective practice and understand employability.

“It has made me independent and not afraid to say what I am good at, before I was a lot quieter” (Arts student).

‘I feel that I have gained valuable skills such as being able to reflect on previous work to help make future work better. I have found that many of the skills acquired can be taken to the workplace” (UBS student).

“I have been able to use the skills I gained from placement within my course and these are real skills that will improve my practice” (Life and Health Sciences student).

Figure 5



Staff perceptions relating to PDP and its support for student placements

Clearly, student placement is an important aspect of employability and it was important to determine if PDP had an effective role in the preparation, management and evaluation of student placement as a valuable preparation for employment. A number of themes emerged from the exploratory questionnaire sent to staff. They were asked, ‘do you think PDP supports placement?’ and responses show a less positive picture about the efficacy of PDP to support employability and a wider range of skills.

There is still confusion between personal development planning (PDP) the process and the online system PACE, even two years after its introduction. In some cases PACE is still referred to as PDS. It is unsure if teaching staff who make this mistake do so through lack of use or if they, in using it, believe that the processes have not changed. There is also a perception that there are too many systems available. A perception of added (and perceived unnecessary) systems and processes can lead to confusion and consequently, resistance among staff to engage with PDP.

> “I feel that there is a lack of knowledge on my part on who deals with what- there is a bit of confusion of where the boundaries are. I think students are also confused by the many different avenues to information.” (member of Accountancy teaching staff)

> “PDP probably supports our placement in an opaque rather than an explicit way. I suspect that ordinarily students don’t really engage in PDP because they don’t see the way it relates to their programme of study and staff buy-in is also very problematic.” (member of Economics teaching staff)

> "I'm all for supporting students in obtaining employment and highlighting their employability (soft + hard) skills, but the number of interfaces we are expected to be proficient in is too broad. The university needs to streamline the number of initiatives down to something much more manageable" (Member of Quantity Surveying teaching staff).

Despite this confusion there are some Schools that, although not referring to PDP explicitly, do engage in PDP activities.

> "We don't tend to explicitly refer to personal development planning. However, we do various things that help our students who are going out on placement, but we don't necessarily refer to them as PDP. We avail of Careers modules that contribute to EDGE. There is a lot of emphasis on problem solving, teamwork, reflection, communication skills etc. in our modules. There are quite a lot of opportunities for our students to engage in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities" [Member of Communications teaching staff].

Schools/Departments that engage with PDP processes use similar types of activities when their students are preparing for/or during placement, such as mock interviews, CV preparation, identifying skills, modules on preparation for placement, reflective portfolios and tutorials with staff. Characteristically, in managed placements in professional environments such as those provided for social work or pharmacy students, engagement with PDP is well supported and demonstrates how the student has progressed as a result of their reflective activities.

> "The PDP system underpins the placement process within the social work programme. …The student identifies the knowledge, skills and values that they have pre placement and those that they wish to develop during the placement. This forms a discussion point during the first placement meeting between the tutor, student and practice teacher. The student and the practice teacher use it as a working document throughout the placement." (member of Social Work teaching staff).

"I do think PDP supports placement and in pharmacy we refer to PDP as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which is a professional and ethical requirement for registration as a pharmacist". (member of Pharmacy teaching staff)

In placements provided for students in disciplines such as Engineering, Modern Languages, Computing, Music, Sports and Business, it was also felt that PDP processes support placement as they engage their students in various activities to support reflective practice.

> "PDP is a fundamental part of the placement year abroad. Students complete monthly reflective logs …. to determine progress with the process of language learning. The information that students provide in their logs can also serve as useful early-warning system if students are experiencing adaption issues during their placement year." (member of Modern Languages teaching staff).

> "I think the UBS placement year assessment process certainly supports PDP, students are required to set objectives, review progress throughout the year. At the end of the

year they also have to consider how their placement experiences will shape their future career plan. Further, some students choose to complete a reflective report rather than a project which will include a more in depth review of skills and how they evidenced/developed skills during the placement period" (member of Ulster Business School teaching staff).

Discussion

There are a number of key messages from the student surveys and from the exploratory staff questionnaire. Student survey results show that while many students believe that although their independence in learning is strong, there are opportunities for developing this aspect of PDP. While forum members report that confusion and resistance among faculty teaching colleagues remains, it seems, at least from the student perspective that the processes that we understand to be inherent in PDP are being provided for in their university experiences. This apparent dichotomy has two worrying elements. First, as teaching staff become more aware that the elements of their teaching that make up the somewhat confusing concept of PDP are already embedded in the student experience, the need for further development, refinement and evaluation may be reduced. In a context where there is ever-growing bureaucracy, and where, increasingly, student perceptions of course effectiveness may place pressure on teaching staff to focus only on those elements of their curricula that are germane to the assessment rubric, the continuing development of long-term employability issues may be inhibited. Second, the emerging agendas for KIS and the development of graduate qualities are likely to *increase* the need for deeper, extended and cross-curricular PDP-related processes to be put in place, all of which are likely to place greater pressure on teaching staff to ensure that these processes are more explicit, effective and up-to-date. We caution, therefore that the 'good' responses reported above need to be built on and developed if they are to meet the needs of value-for-fees aware students. We have seen that mandating alone is insufficient for soft-skill activities related to employability to be embedded in curricula. Drawing on the definition of employability from HEA, as:

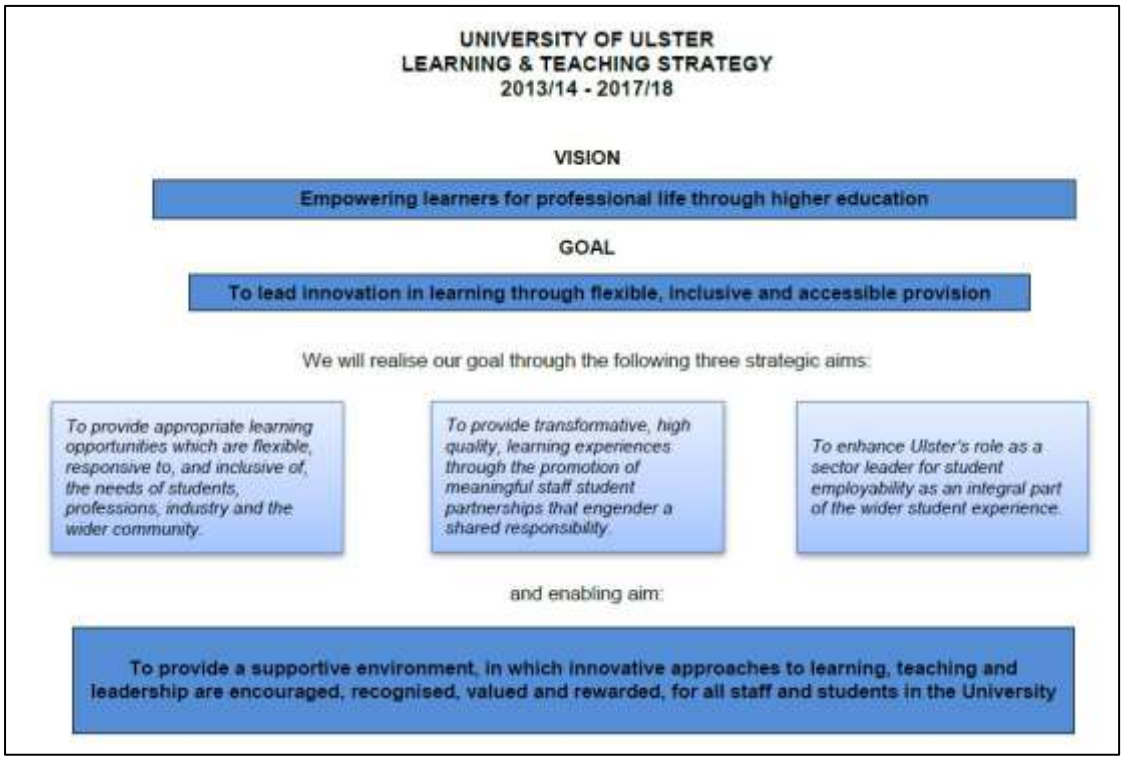
> "…a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy..." (HEA, 2006 p8)

This definition is unhelpful in providing a strategic starting point for developing employability within university curricula, mainly because it seems to avoid any practical application in curriculum design. As a consequence, while our research was conducted within the sheltered experience of the university, it will be important to know to what extent skills, understandings and personal attributes will be sustainable beyond their development within the university programmes, or, indeed, if they are appropriate to life beyond graduation. In particular, we need to learn how the PDP processes engaged in at university, are sustainable into employment. Current understanding of KIS seems to be related to the *gaining* of employment, a politically attractive agenda that may be used to differentiate universities and courses.

Conclusion

The University of Ulster 2013 Learning and Teaching Strategy (University of Ulster, 2013 p.20) shows that employability is now one of three key strategic aims and has more prominence than before (see figure 6 below):

Figure 6



One of its enabling objectives suggests that the aim should be realised through, "… faculty approaches to employability in curriculum design and delivery that are transparent…". Our data suggests that there is some way to go before such transparency can be realised. For example, while some teaching staff are aware of the contribution of PDP process to the employability agenda, the overall picture is still patchy, suggesting that much needs to be done to embed a culture of employability more comprehensively. Alternatively, the data from students suggest that there is widespread embedding already, and perhaps grounded sharing and peer collaboration may be a more effective way to share good practice. The Learning and Teaching strategy states that its enabling aim should facilitate its vision but does not suggest how colleagues must realise the goals set out. A possible third strand of any approach to PDP may be a review of studies advice processes and procedures. Studies advice can be a strong link between teaching and learning, where the lack of transparency around employability skills cited by teaching staff above, can be reduced or eliminated.

The new Learning and Teaching strategy is likely to be implemented in the face of a greater pace of curricular and administrative change. Additionally, just around the corner is the upheaval of an almost complete campus move from Jordanstown to Belfast along with what appear to be fundamental changes proposed to services such as ISD. Our concern is that important long-term and less visible agendas such as employability may be inhibited by more immediate practical and visible concerns.

The incoming months and years will allow leaders and other stakeholders to judge if the University has deployed sufficient resources to embed employability more comprehensively than is currently the case. Our data does not examine whether, beyond graduation, our former students can deploy the skills that enable them to engage effectively with employers, peers, clients and others and we take the view that there is a need for longitudinal research to determine the sustainability of our employment practices. Only then will the University strapline *"Professional Learning for Professional Life"* be seen to be an accurate reflection of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning experiences.

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Do Mobile learning technologies enhance student engagement?

Sharon McClements, Mark McKane and Kenny McCartan, University of Ulster

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the key findings of a pilot study evaluating the application of the innovative Mobile Learning App (MLA) that uses iOS/ Android phones to interact with Turningpoint (TP) learning technologies. Turningpoint technology (TP) is a voting system that engages students in the learning process by creating interactive presentations. Students interact with the presentation by responding to questions, embedded in the presentation, using either a handheld polling device or a Mobile Learning App (MLA). The pilot study considered the effectiveness of the MLA on the learner experience. Specifically the study was designed to test the theories that learning technologies enhance student engagement. Furthermore this study considered if students were more engaged using the App than with the traditional Turningpoint handsets. An electronic questionnaire was issued and the results suggest that the students found both the App and handsets engaging, motivational and supportive. The paper concludes by considering the salient factors that create an improvement in the process of students as partners and the wider implications for the academic community.

Introduction

Embedding the principles of assessment and feedback effectively requires a strategic view of the student engagement process. Student engagement is a critical determinant in student success (Ooms, 2008), and a key condition for high-quality student learning, (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Student learning can be enhanced through the adoption of the *Ulster Principles of Assessment and feedback for learning (2011).* This paper focuses on one of the seven guiding principles, namely, '*encourage interaction and dialogue'*, particularly in relation to enhancing teacher – learner interaction and dialogue. Teacher – learner interaction '*can at times be a challenge'*, (Bond et al., 2012) however Brenton, (2009) found that teacher – learner engagement can be enhanced through the adoption and integration of learning technologies. The adoption of learning technologies has increased and research has identified its ability to improve the learner experience. This paper focuses on two key issues, salient to the integration of learning technologies:-

Key Issue 1 - Learning technologies enhances student engagement

This paper evaluates the application of learning technologies in enhancing student engagement. The application of learning technologies is '*becoming increasingly utilised'*, Brenton, (2009), by teachers and learners as medium to promote and enhance student learning through effective interactive engagement. Welsh et al.,(2003) concur adding that the technology itself must be both effective and efficient to facilitate learning. Ultimately the technology requires '*learners to be responsible'*, (Fry et al. 2009). The student survey identified 'responsibility for learning' as a key area of questioning in this pilot study.

Key Issue 2 - Usability of the technology

This paper identifies the key strengths and weaknesses inherent with the successful application of Mobile Learning App (MLA) that is now available through TurningPoint TP, as an alternative to the hand held polling devices. Through improved functionality, (perform calculations, text short paragraph answers and generate results in graphical format), the

MLA is designed to mitigate inherent inefficiencies associated with TP technologies, which include:-

- time consuming to set up,
- difficult to use,
- confusion about learning and
- potentially high upfront costs Brenton, (2009).

Case Study

This paper presents the results of a pilot study comprising of 70 undergraduate students on the BSc. Hons. Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management degree programme, enrolled in years 1and 2 of the programme. Students in each of the years were presented with a series of questions during tutorial sessions in semester one and two that were designed to enhance teacher – learner engagement contextualised with the module learning outcomes. Students could avail of the App or handset. For students using the MLA, individual student responses to each of the questions were collected via the web. The presentations of the results were shown in TP which facilitated the collection and presentation of both individual and group responses.

An electronic survey was designed to investigate if the learning technologies enhance student engagement and if there were any differences pertaining to student engagement in relation to using the App or the handset. The survey was issued to each of the students at the end of semester two. The quantitative survey, ascertaining students opinions on the two key issues identified by this pilot, adopted a Likert scale (*1strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree*). A mean ranking of the students' perception of the learning technologies in relation to enhancing the student learning experience and promoting engagement were analysed. In addition a mean ranking of students perceptions to questions pertaining the usability of the learning technologies were also analysed. The results of the survey and the analysis of the data are presented below.

Results

The response rate from the questionnaire was 52.86% (37). Of those students who responded, 81.08% (30) of the respondents did own a smart phone, however only 16.22% (6) agreed to participate with the use of the mobile app. Despite the advantage that there was no cost involved in using the App, (the hand held sets currently costing £25.00 each), students cited a key reason for the low uptake was that the app *'can be slow when there is a big class'.* The often slow response time of the App was as a result of inadequate wi-fi signals, and wi-fi hotspots. Despite this criticism this App was fast and efficient in areas where the wi-fi strength was good.

Table 1 presents the key data captured from the student electronic questionnaire in relation to learning technologies enhancing student engagement.

Table 1 Learning technologies enhance student engagement

Survey Question	Mean Rank App	Mean Rank TP Handset
Useful tool for Learners	**3.71**	**3.83**
Improves knowledge and understanding	**3.71**	**4.13**
Motivates me to think and act on feedback	**4.00**	**3.97**
Enhances discussion around learning	**3.86**	**4.13**
Provides a supportive learning environment for students	**3.86**	**4.07**

Overall students found both the app and handset ***useful***, ***motivational*** and ***supportive***. In relation to the enhancement of discussion between teacher- learner there was a significantly higher percentage of respondents strongly agreed/ agreed when using the handset than using the app. One respondent added that the ***'slow connection'*** of the app created a barrier to effective communication. Despite this limitation the learning technologies were ***'enjoyed'*** by the classes and provided students and teachers with instant feedback. Due to the Apps ability to store questions and answers, it was found that this provided a greater degree of motivation upon which subsequent action and reflection could be based.

Table 2 – Usability of the learning technologies

Survey Question	Mean Rank App	Mean Rank TP Handset
Easy tool to use	**4.71**	**4.37**
Confident in Use	**4.43**	**4.31**
I would like to use the tool again	**4.00**	**4.13**

Overall students would like to use the learning technology tools again, with a higher percentage strongly agreeing to use the app again. Students had greater confidence in using the App despite the increase in functionality. This suggests that students have good

understanding and knowledge of App technology and their ability to engage effectively was not constrained by this new technology. A number of open ended questions were asked to clarify the data. When students were asked to identify the key strengths of the app, they stated that the app was '***user friendly***; ' **the app is very easy to use**', '**very handy'** and had a '**quick response'** Crucially students also identified the innovate feature of the app that facilitates the storage of the questions and answers which students felt would be beneficial to ***'look over them at exam time'.*** From a teaching perspective the App made preparation easier as there was no requirement to create participant lists in advance. The traditional version of the TP utilising hand held polling devices, it was necessary to manually create student participant list, so as to provide individual feedback to students. In addition a reduced number of handsets as of students, with smartphones could use the MLA in lieu of the handset.

Lessons learnt

The results of this study are intended to inform and identify to teachers the key benefits and current limitation of the App, particularly in relation to '*enhancing the quality of the student learning experience'*, University of Ulster Teaching and Learning Strategy (p.4). This study identifies the impact of MLA in enhancing student engagement and promoting learning. However, the deficiencies in wi-fi strength and problems with the App disconnecting after periods of inactivity, had a detrimental effect on the usability of the App and created limitations for the pilot study in providing a more rigorous application of the App across the student pilot group.

Conclusion

This pilot study demonstrated the use of innovative mobile app learning technologies. It was found that the App can facilitate both summative and formative feedback, providing the essential two-way dialogue process between lecturer and student, thus promoting and enhancing student engagement. The increased functionality of the App, which was found by this study easy to use, includes the '*promotion of thinking rather than just providing information' Brenton (2009),* and improves the learner experience, to an extent that students would like to avail of learning technologies as part of their learning experience. In conclusion this pilot study concurred with the theory that learning technologies enhance student engagement, and identified differing levels of satisfaction between innovative and traditional technologies. Following on from this pilot study, it is proposed that further investigations between into the integration of MLA between the year groups should be considered and evaluated.

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